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TOES UP





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AN ALPINO IN MARCHING ORDER

# Toes Up

A CHRONICLE OF GAY AND DOLEFUL ADVENTURES,  
OF ALPINI AND MULES AND WINE

*by Paolo Monelli*

TRANSLATED BY ORLO WILLIAMS



HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY

NEW YORK

*Published in Italy as "Le Scarpe Al Sole"*

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*first edition*

*Designed by Robert S. Josephy*

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TO THE MEMORY  
OF  
CAPTAIN ENRICO BUSA  
WHO FELL AT CASTELGOMBERTO  
ON DECEMBER 4TH, 1917,  
OF  
PRIVATE VIGILIO LOAT  
WHO FELL AT ORTIGARA  
ON JUNE 20TH, 1917,  
AND OF  
ALL THE GALLANT ALPINI  
WHO DIED FIGHTING  
FROM TONALE TO THE UPLANDS  
FROM MONTE SANTO TO THE GRAPPA

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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

THANKS to the copious explanations of all doubtful points by Signor Monelli, I hope I may say that all the war terms in this book are correctly translated. It has been impossible, however, to render the dialect as effective as it is in the original. It must be realized that dialects are still living languages in Italy, not simply degradations of polite speech as with us they are (wrongly) regarded. Most of the Alpini dialect in this book is Venetian; even the gallant Captain Busa speaks it, with very comic effect. It would have been absurd to choose a particular dialect of English—say of some Highland region—for the purpose of translation; the result would have been pedantic. I have, therefore, chosen a conventional sort of soldiers' talk, which has no pretence to be folkloristically correct. I must also say that I have translated the Alpini bad language by the equivalents used in the British Army. Italians use quite different oaths from the British. Theirs would sound to us far more blasphemous than ours, and vice versa; unless they sounded more innocuous. Both are innocent in intention, and sufficiently lurid in effect.

O. W.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

PAOLO MONELLI, born at Fiorano di Modena in 1891; doctor in law; private, then officer, in the Alpini; promoted captain for meritorious service in the war; four medals *al valore* and the cross *al merito di guerra*; slightly wounded; prisoner of war for one year.

After the war, went on various military and political missions to Vienna, Prague, Cracow, Leopoldis, and Warsaw. Since 1920 a journalist; special reporter for various papers—most recently of the *Corriere della Sera*—in various European countries. For four years was the special correspondent of *La Stampa* at Berlin.

Has published the following:

*Le Scarpe al Sole*, 1920; republished by Treves in 1927.

*Viaggio alle Isole Freddazzurre*—a voyage to North Cape and Spitzbergen, Alpes, 1926.

*Io e I Tedeschi*, Treves, 1927.

*Sette Battaglie*, 1928, with a *Sermone per il Decennale*, in which he examines the moral and psychological situation of ex-soldiers ten years after the end of the war.

*La Guerra è Bella ma è Socomoda*, text, Treves, 1929.

Has translated *War*, by Renn.



## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

### TO THE FIRST EDITION

IN the slang of the Alpini, *mettere le scarpe al sole*<sup>1</sup> means to die in battle. In this war chronicle of mine, to tell the truth, my discourse is not only of the fallen. Many of us have come back, have resumed our travels along the ways of the world, and are already hearing the summons to other struggles. But these are new struggles, for different ideas: and we too are new, reborn from the ruins of a dead past whose indelible furrows are left upon us, like the abandoned trenches on the crests of hills now once more solitary. That of ourselves which we took into the war we did not bring back again: it was truly a life that was taken from us as the bullet took it from thousands of our comrades whose collars bore the flame or the patch.<sup>2</sup> All that was most simple-hearted and most lavish in our youth turned its toes up, too, on the last rocks retaken from the enemy, on the last days of a time which an interval of two years has made fabulously remote.

The manuscript of this book had been finished for some time: but the wary publishers refused it, now more than a year ago, because it was out of fashion, because it now seemed bad taste to pay any more attention to the living and the dead who obeyed the order for a holocaust. Will it still seem so today, when a reborn spirit of youth sings again the songs of our vigils and our passion in city squares and in country villages?

I am sure it will not. In any case, this little volume of mine

<sup>1</sup> Literally "To put one's boots to the sun."

<sup>2</sup> *Fiamma* = a colored patch of irregular shape; *mostrina* = an oblong patch. Marks of the different corps. The Alpini had a green *fiamma*.

is not meant to be a bugle-call to battle or a barometer of new times. There must still be some men, disheartened by the grayness of civil life or living as hermits in some Alpine gorge, who lived these humble years of war without splendor or glory, and yet feel their hearts heavy with regretful longing. To all these I offer my book, just as it comes, just as we then offered the viaticum of wine and song to the chance guests of our cordial messes.

P. M.

*Berlin,*  
*February, 1921.*

## PART I

“Aber zum Teufel, warum sitzt  
Ihr denn im Sattel und reitet  
durch dieses giftige Land den  
türkischen Hunden entgegen?  
Der Marquis lächelt: Um wie-  
derzukehren.”—*Die Weise von  
Liebe und Tod des Cornets  
Christoph Rilke.*



EXAMINATION of conscience.

I have dug my slack soul out of the matutinal ignobility of bed, and I lash it devoutly, according to the counsel of St. Cherubino. What pride can I have had up to now in the eagle's feather, and the destiny of carrying it into a righteous war, when I was dallying in the easy life of the rear? Now, in the cold morning, I am leaving for my battalion. I shall scan the eyes of the comrades who have preceded me, and of the soldiers who will be entrusted to me, to see what marks are left on them by having lingered on the confines of life and having come back. And I shall anatomize my heart, to know with what purity it is preparing for the holocaust.

No holocaust was in that girl's thoughts who, last night, wept tears at my departure from her lying eyes. Instead, she besought me to dedicate my first leave to her, and not to betray her up there. But old Mother Vendramin, who has already heard that some of her boarders have been killed in the Alpine warfare, fears it a little. She is old Mother Vendramin who for thirty years has been a merciful provider of care and food to the Alpini officers of the garrison of Feltre—ever since she, the *parona*, was a pretty girl much courted by the second-lieutenants of those days. Alas, those second-lieutenants are majors and colonels today, with tummies and spectacles: and we touch our stars when we think of some.<sup>1</sup> And the *parona* has become a nice, goody-goody old lady, who lectures the young men when they come home late at night, and surrounds herself with maids sufficiently greasy to be respected, although with sufficiently plump behinds to be pinched. It will not be your maids, *parona*, who will disturb my

<sup>1</sup> To touch the stars on the collar of the tunic is a gesture to keep off bad luck.

war-vigil. But it will be your enormous cutlets that I shall regret on the nights when another hole in the waistbelt is my only refreshment. And what shall we do with the poem that we wanted to dedicate to you, written in Latin, so that the priests could read it too—

Sunt ibi patellae paronaque in uncta culina,  
Et super focum stat cotoletta mea . . . ?

To better times, *parona*: meanwhile, bring some wine; I am off to the battalion.

And the *parona* gave me wine, and at the bottom of the bottle I looked for the naked truth. Examination of conscience.

Is it boredom with my empty life of peace-time, is it the attraction of the risky game upon the peaks, is it that I cannot bear not to have been where others will tell of having been—or is it simply a humble, honest love of my country which draws me with such greedy consent to the life of war? To lose one's spirits in a musty office, to speak with tobacco-stained ushers through their hatches, to chop stale philosophy in the corner of a café, dully to tramp the path of a career, intent on not losing a minute lest a colleague pass in front of you, to make love on Saturday night because on the morrow, being Sunday, you can stay longer in bed—oh, what a good breeze the war has blown upon all this old rubbish, and what fun to see that your tenacious colleague has labored in vain to get your place! (Now, however, he is in the sanitary corps, and by saving his skin can keep an eye on business.)

It was this, perhaps. And perhaps it was this leaven of youth which makes us dance on the tight-rope of danger with acute rapture, because of which a faith pleases us if difficult and a task enthuses us if risky; or it was to love life more jealously when brought safely out of battle as I loved it with more jealous love when I brought it safely back from the insidious perils of the mountains, and when—I was a hungry student—an awkward peak was the limit of my desires. And as in those days the rousing tap on the hut's windows before dawn dragged me

reluctantly out on to the still darkling mountain, and cowardly shrinkings slackened my weary body and my aching legs, and thoughts of renunciation tempted my heart, so this morning, when I was called, as I lay in bed and thought: "So I have got to go off to the war," a sudden cowardice took hold of me. I seemed to be like a drunken man who undertakes an enormous risk in his cups, and considers it with dismay the morning after, when the fumes have passed away. A meticulous terror seized me, which described to me with exactitude the danger of death, the anguish of the marches, the discomforts of the rain, the exasperating vigils, the short and troubled slumbers. And the bed in which I snuggled seemed to me a divine thing which I was going to lose for ever.

The chilly morning cleanses the soul. In the hollows of the pastures the red houses with low eaves huddle together under the slender Gothic belfries. A stupefaction of peace (the men are at the war in Galicia, or are dead: the women salute the conquerors with a humble smile as they attend to the labors of the fields). In the background, gleaming white, the Dolomites flecked with shadows of long clouds as your eyes are shadowed by long absences, Heliodora.

Well, let us think no more of Heliodora, who will now be opening wide her large eyes, more blue than usual, from her geranium-decked window upon this bright morning of her mountains. And let us not search too closely the depths of our shrunken conscience. Let us sacrifice to this pleasant adventure our last remembrance of books closed for ever.

"The little marquis asked:

"'You are very young, aren't you?'

"And Herr von Langenau, partly in sadness and partly in pride, said:

"'Eighteen.'

"Then they were silent.

"Later the Frenchman asked:

"'Have you too a loved one at home, Herr Junker?'

"'And you?' returned von Langenau.



“‘She is as fair as you.’

“And they were silent again, until the German cried:

“‘But, then, devil take it, why are you in the saddle here with us, and riding against the Turkish dogs across this accursed land?’

“The marquis smiled. ‘So as to come back.’”

Away with all this sentimental baggage, to follow with light heart our destiny towards new paths and unknown risks! In the breath of the morning there is a voluptuous sense of emptiness—pride of healthy youth—a thrill of expectation—a romantic love already felt in other years when following the border with rope and ice-ax. And unexpressed vows of sacrifice and humiliation make my presumptuous heart swell on the journey towards the front line.

And it was the second line, after all. For I find the battalion at rest.

But these Alpini who lounge about the village streets are different from those I left at the dépôt. And when I enter the tiny room, all smoky with pipe-smoke, and round the little table I see the knowing beards of the major and the surgeon-captain, and then the major gets up and says the words of welcome with kindly simplicity, and the glass of wine clinks in circle with the glasses of my new comrades, I have the impression of being among new men—among men, in truth. Men who have seen the confines of life and have come back.

And the captain says to me: “You must do three things. Get your hair cut, let your beard grow, and take to drinking wine.”

*Bieno, November.*

Comic little urchins come with a little bucket to take the remains of the rations. They wait quietly, and when they have got them they go lurching off. The old cooks smile under their already gray mustaches with a hearty kindness, thinking perhaps of their own far-off children who have a daddy at the war.

One by one the soldiers' wives come to visit them from all the Feltrian villages, walking over the mountains beyond the old frontier. This evening Gallina's wife arrived. The soldier comes with his crafty face to ask the lieutenant for leave, and the woman looks for a bed in a house in the village. And tonight they will gayly tumble the bedclothes, not without alternating their simple amorous sports with some discussion of domestic economy, whether they ought to sell the cow, or pull the bank-notes out of the sack. You are not coming, my child, to bring me the gift of your little wanton body. And I plunge my face and my desire into the green handkerchief still strong with your perfume.

But what a ruffian, that Gallina! To please his "old 'oman" he has cut off his beard, and now is a hideous sight, with those great mustaches without a pedestal, and the young men of the platoon are chaffing him.

Fàoro da Lamon, when asked what trade he followed in civil life, answered: "I kept cattle."

"You, da Lamon? You mean that you were a smuggler."

"Eh, you know best, *signor tenente*."

And then Fàoro lets himself go: a good soldier he is, with the eyes of a cat, who at Col San Giovanni went alone with his bayonet against four Bavarians, put two to flight, killed one, and took one prisoner.

"*Signor tenente*," says the smuggler this evening in a disconsolate tone, "they are making war to enlarge the frontiers, and I shall lose my trade."

On the honey-colored rocks of the highest peaks the sunset is lingering, while darkness has hurried over the somber valley.

In these conquered lands the war is languishing; only far-off rumbling of guns disturbs the languor of the evening.

When the sky grew gray with clouds like this, and the far-

off rocks of the Vette looked soft like this, I used to go and wait for you in the dark avenue of firs. And I who thought I was coming to a war of every moment, in which the thought of you would be a cooling memory in the brief repose, have come to an enervating vigil in which the memory of you is simply anguish at having you no longer.

I am like an ox. A lazy ox who in the warmth of his stall is chewing the dried grass that was such fresh pasture in the summer meadows. I chew over the old dreams, the old stupidities. Vigil of war! When I left for the battalion, I jotted this line in my note-book: "Every sadness sets behind me." And when I put on my Alpini uniform for the first time, I wrote words of humble acquiescence in my peace-time note-book:

*Sorella morte, o fraticel Francesco!  
Termine dolce ad avventure gaie.  
Nell' aria c'è un odore di pan fresco,  
Il buon odore delle lavandaie.*

(Sister death, O little brother Francis!  
Sweet\*end to gay adventures.  
In the air there is an odor of fresh bread,  
And the good smell of washer-women.)

But today I am gaining the esteem of these soldiers who have already fought by making the company maneuver in close order to perfection (far better than the captain) over the yellow-green fields.

A letter from Private Ferro Paolo, of the class of 1884, from Santa Giustina, in the Belluno district, sent with other drafts to a battalion of the 8th on the Upper Isonzo:

"HONORED LIEUTENANT,—Having been here a short time I want to give you our news, Signor Lieutenant, although we were only acquainted a short time, having finished for tonight my two

hours of Sentry-go which is frightful in this place where we are at a point 2500 meters High with more than three feet of snow and terrible cold, and I want to let you know that all of us reservists of the 1884 class are glad to be here on these high peaks where we see each other so well every morning when there is not a low Fog that we could quite well talk to one another. we are no more than 200 yards away and they try at us day and nite but with us old Alpini they allways gets the bullets in their backs and they allways runns like dogs one this way and the other that for they see they can't do any business with us. I heard on Saturday Night when on sentry-go or understood from the german they says that the Alpini soldiers who wear the bird on their Hats are brigands. So signor Lieutenant all us 1884 class are content and all the rest of us here will always speak friendly of you because the night we left you diegned to give us your hand Has though we had always been in company as Brothers in arms so I thank you very much. With my respects the old soldier of your Company

“FERRO PAOLO.”

We are off. Rain; a slow clearing of mist from a dun sky. Then snow. In the wood hooded with snow, along avenues like those of seemly towns. The dusk takes a softer light from the ground: the trees are Christmas-trees, and the huts stuck in the snow—from their windows the light shines out upon the whiteness—are warm mangers. They draw us onwards as our pleasant goals. One thinks that one desires nothing more than to lie upon dry straw, to smell the healthy reek of one's snoring neighbors, and to indulge the restless journeyings of the lice. But one continues to march.

And now the moon comes out to play at hide and seek with the solemn pines with powdered heads. She came to the pine-avenue last moon, and her tigress's teeth gleamed with pleasure. Perhaps tonight, beyond the line of sentries, we shall meet the enemy; perhaps in this moon she is making me cuckold. Amen.

This scene of deep, intact snow is not new to me. A soft mute of white upon the complaining of the torrents and the rustling of the pines. The wind makes no sound, it dusts the loaded branches, veils of silver gleam against the sun; little avalanches of snow, stirred by the soundless footstep, slide silently down. But in the background there is a rhythmical hammering which rings clearly above all the calm of the valley, a frequent clicking of balls on a crystal billiard-table, muttered back by the encircling mountains, and you might think it a carpenter at work, if your trappings of war did not tell you something else. Rifle shots, then. But they are so far away and are so sharply incised upon the cold air that they say nothing to the heart (it must be D'Inca with his advanced patrol who has found the Germans in the upper pastures). The war has not touched me yet.

*Christmas, 1915.*

This time there is a smell of action in the air.

A lot of whispering, at mess, between the major and the captain. Then the fellow from the 264th arrived, they had a pow-wow, and we subalterns were sent out to contemplate the stars. We went to the inn, instead, to salute Mary the blonde and Josepha the brunette, and to drink light wine of Salorno that stiffened our hearts for tomorrow's festival.

A touch of excitement. What are we going to do? Where are we going? Eyes glisten; impatience opens a void in the body. Garbari says: "Panarotta," the mountain which rolls down its shells upon the valley every evening.

And now the captain's orders have arrived.

Then, at midnight, the march off. In the village, drenched in the moon's clear light, a hurly-burly—mule drivers, mules, soldiers, cook-boxes,<sup>1</sup> and ammunition boxes, all getting a move on. The beating of hobnails on ice. Pale stars.

<sup>1</sup> The Alpini had special sealed cook-boxes which kept food and coffee hot for twenty-four hours.



And I march as though in a dream along the moonlit roads, thinking quite reasonably of home, sweet home, far away, and of the happiness of recounting in the future the adventures I am living now. The soldiers march in silence; only a few oaths, a little muttered conversation punctuated with b—'s. The mess-tin which clinks and one's neighbor's rifle are the only preoccupations.

We arrive—a forced march, six hours without a halt—in a valley where no sun penetrates, shut in by high snowy ranges. The eve of battle under a bitter sky and frost. We bivouac in rifled villas. The comic furniture of red bentwood amuses the soldiers; the châtelaine's love-letters amuse the officers. I have a white cottage, a little rococo bedroom, an oval mirror, a low divan. But the continuous trampling of soldiers up and down the wooden stairs hinders sleep.

Tonight we are to attack a position we have never seen, which we must reach by an unknown maze of woods. We try to find our position on the map, but—as a brother officer of an infantry detachment who are there and know the place well (if so, why don't *they* go and take it?) kindly tells us—the map has more errors than indications. Oh, well, let us trust to our noses, and not criticize our superiors in the first engagement. Let us rather try to follow the sing-song chanting of the platoon which is splendidly installed in the little red villa:

*Me ne andavo per fare un'azion,  
Sempre allegri e mai passion!*

(That is how we went into the fight,  
Always merry and always bright!)

And we go on again, at nine at night, beyond the outposts, beneath a bright embroidery of stars. "Ere midnight will the moon arise."

Ere midnight the moon arose. The thick wood in which we march cautiously (the scrunching on the frozen snow is magni-

fied in our anxiety) becomes romantically animated by shadows and soft lights. A gentle stream of wistful regret dulls our senses. The lazy ease of bed in a far-off room—to be a snail, so as to snuggle into the house that goes along with one, and sleep—and then how hungry, how cold we are! Ta-pun! An alarm.

Sudden chill; heart that runs down to one's boots. The first shot of the war: the warning that the machine is in motion and has got you inexorably inside. You're in it. You won't ever get out. Perhaps you didn't believe it till now; up to yesterday you gambled with the stake of your life as though with a certainty of being able to take it back; you talked glibly of heroisms and sacrifices of which you knew nothing. Now you're in for it. Fate keeps the bank. A livid dawn as background for dismay, unrealizable desires; but the others, what are they thinking about?

Zanella no longer wears his impassible face; there is a kind of inner fire of hilarity which glows above it: he smells game, he says: "Look, there's two running away!" And he fires two shots down towards the edge of the wood.

Then something falls away from me, nothing is left of that anguish, and I am as cold and clear-headed as at drill on a parade-ground.

Where is the enemy? Sleep at dawn. The engagements of patrols about the wood are trying, as we wait. Lieutenant Frescura comes running up, red-faced, cheery, with four men: he brings an order, and disappears to the right, and then a crackle of rifle-fire, a wounded man moaning, and the sluggish day that rises behind the wood, and still nothing to do. Here are your rations, third platoon.

Machine-guns. The din closer. Lightly wounded who come in on foot.

"B—, we shan't get no rations. We got to go in ourselves now." We are going into battle. In line of sections, forward.

Is death this riot of shrieks and whistles, these branches snapped off in the wood, and the long-drawn wheeze of shells in the sky? Calmness.



When we come in rather stupefied, and the men are glad because they have come out with a whole skin, and in me there is the slight joviality of one's baptism of fire, the major—and it wasn't his fault, for we saw him always in front of our eyes, and if he didn't get shot it was because there is a God who looks after brave majors—gets ticked off by the divisional commander who greets us at the gap in the wire, hard, cold, and hostile. He says too few of us got killed. He says we ought to have taken the position. He says it is very easy to find, even on the map (and he consults the map that has more mistakes than indications). But he forgets to say that you can't see at night, and that to find a little hump among a thousand such he had sent a battalion which had never done a single patrol in that locality. He doesn't think of that, or he would have to recite the *Mea culpa*. He stands stiff and frowning on the path, looking at us pass by. Then the buzz of a motor; lounging back in his car, he goes back to his castle. He'd better hurry up, for the enemy artillery is beginning to nose round here too, and this is no place for him. I have my fleabag spread out on the low divan in the rococo sitting-room. The stars twinkle through the roof, that has fallen in.

Relieved by an infantry battalion. The Alpini have put down their packs at the edge of the road. A good infantryman comes up to see, and tries the weight of an Alpino pack with gestures of surprise. He calls; his comrade comes up, has a try himself, and is amazed. They comment in low tones. The largeness of the mess-tin also gives him a shock. On the other side of the road the Alpino, taciturn, looks and says nothing, leaning on his stick, "like a lion when he stands still."

*New Year's Day, 1916.*

A good omen in the morning, when we have passed the outposts on patrol, to see amid the blackness of the pines the red of the snows upon the mountains that shut in Trent.

We are going to look for the wounded man whom Porro's patrol had to leave out yesterday: there had been a sudden volley from the enemy in ambush; two were killed at once, another had a leg broken, and the three unwounded were forced to make off as best they could. But De Cet, who had pretended to be dead, and had stayed motionless a long while, came in to Malga Puisle at night and said that a hundred meters below him there was still the wounded man, whom the Austrians had not carried in.

I found De Cet this morning still asleep; I got him to tell me how the thing occurred, and he told me in a few words, without moving from his corner, and I ended by telling him to come on patrol with me to show me the place.

A rustling in the straw, and a cross voice mumbles:

"What a sell!"

In the captured and pillaged villa we are preparing a delightful home. Tea in cups, a French novel. But the advanced posts are two paces off, and if Panarotta cared to drop a bauble on us!

Too lazy to find new words and new images for this calm evening: red clouds on the soft serenity, rawness of snow on the warmth of the rocks, the lithe pricking of the peaks up towards those clouds: and the voices of the men, a paternal rumbling of gunfire over Borgo, and an indescribable sense of expectation in men and things.

Is not that what you wanted? In front of a good fire, at the war, the evening after a successful reconnoissance, on the eve of more serious happenings. Songs of thoughtless gayety, the sense that the present time will be the most perfect in your life. And your sickest fancies all put to flight.

The bombardment is let loose on the pretty little town that shivers in the cold wind and the sun. Huge, indifferent clouds in

the light sky, the mountains a novelty of mixed colors. And there goes the shell, splitting the sky; it bursts, it strikes and befouls.

At table, bright gleams of sun, and yellow glow of wine in the bright glasses. We are relating conquests of women in the brave town, which continues to live an almost normal life under fire, at two paces from the advanced posts. An absurd life, too. Walking out. Officers in cord<sup>1</sup> tunics, the men free to go out as usual. From the café to the advanced post, five minutes' walk. And in front of the café there passes one's torn brother officer who has come off reconnoissance, with his wounded, with a prisoner. Then Panarotta begins firing: a shot falls on the house; you can see the sky through the enormous hole in the roof; you must go a story lower down. But not even on the ground floor is one safe; a shell enters the company office, tickles the captain's ear, wounds an orderly, and makes all the papers dusty.

And everything—papers, women, wine, and war—drenched in the warm sun which sheds a bland dreaminess upon the gleaming hills, trembles in the clear current of the stream, and enlivens the engagements in the sounding valley.

Tonight we went to clear a house, five hundred yards beyond the lines, of which the inhabitants had remained. I know it well, that house. Yesterday morning, when Panarotta was dropping its candle-ends on Borgo, and up the valley towards Novaledo there was brisk fighting by the 64th, who were making a reconnoissance in force, I got the order to go out and make sure that no nasty surprise came down from Sant' Osvaldo, on the company's rear. Stationed behind a little wall, I suddenly saw the little house in the field of my glasses, four children playing at ring-o'-roses in the yard in front, and the mother at the window hanging out washing in the sun. The children quite indifferent to the noise of rifle-fire, to the tearing noise

<sup>1</sup> At the front the officers wore the same coarse stuff as the men.

of the shells cleaving the sky: and what to us was war in earnest, arousing violent sensations, seemed to them to be only the rumbling of a distant storm.

But they will take away the vision of the war as it burst savagely on their eyes roughly opened from sleep, when we went tonight to fetch them away with their mother: a sentry at the door, hurried whispers, arms gleaming in the light of dark lanterns, and the mother's desperate bundling together, as she wept, of their dearest possessions.

Barèl of the Feltre battalion, mad Barèl, the bravest Alpino in the battalion, the terror of Arabs in Lybia, a perfect villain and a great drinker, if I must say so—Barèl has been on patrol, and has come back with his booty, he too, for we all “find” various ridiculous little things out there (the most important things are “found” by those who have not to waste any time shooting); and Campari has put some black ostrich feathers taken from a lady's bonnet in his hat instead of his feather, and De Lazzer has got a parcel of shirts for his children. Barèl went to a priest's house, and found something better still.

This afternoon we saw him coming down the road, tall, hard, serious, glowing with wine, with the three-cornered red hat of a priest on his head, looking carefully round to avoid missing any of his superiors, so that he could make them a fine regulation salute. My God, if the major meets him, he'll eat him alive! This thought had hardly passed through my head when, behold, Major Bosio appears at the end of the street coming towards Barèl. We hold our breath in expectation of the tragedy; we well know Bosio's vivid wrath. But Bosio, when he gets within twenty yards of the behatted man, stops, takes out his matches and a Virginia cigar, turns towards the wall, and begins lighting his cigar very carefully—so carefully that Barèl does not succeed in getting off his salute on him, and the major has plenty of time to recompose his features into the gravity suiting his rank.

The evenings when we come in from outpost duty, and the column slides downwards over the frozen snow of the mule-track, when on the black mountain the moon is dancing with veils of ice, Loat, the machine-gunner, intones, in a low voice, the song of return:

*Quando saremo  
le nostre case  
la nostra madre  
ci abbraccerà.*

(When we reach  
Our happy homes  
Our good old mammy  
Will give us a kiss.)

The platoon follows with the chorus. The hobnails beat on the frozen snow. At the end of the valley a heliograph is twinkling its call. On the tops of the mountains lights are twinkling: stars rising, or the bivouac of the advanced post.

*Dove sei stato,  
caro figliuolo,  
per tanti mesi,  
a fare il soldà?*

(Where have you been,  
My darling son,  
So many months  
A-making war?)

How many months? One can no longer count them. Do not the old reservist corporals call the recruits "years" and "centuries," as though to fix it well in their heads that the time of their military service will be numbered by years and centuries? De Riva, who has been in Lybia and brings out an oath every three words, says: "Now and then, b—— it, they calls 'em back to be civilians, then dismisses 'em, and they comes back to be soldiers again."



*Io sono stato  
nell' alto Tirolo,  
dove la neve  
fiocca l'està.*

(I have been  
Up in the Tyrol,  
Where the snowflakes  
Fall in May.)

And where there are tumbledown huts and double-fly tents covered with snow; where nobody knows anything of the world far away, and only at evening, if the sky is clear, can we see the red cottages shining down there in the plain where a woman is waiting for us—or is cuckolding us with a territorial; where live De Lazzer's children and the motor-car drivers, Marzarotto's mule and the third échelon store; Mimiola's cakes and the fair-haired little girl who gave me a green handkerchief strong of her scent.

Loat, do you not see how soft the stars look in the moon's paleness? Haven't you left your sweetheart at home, you young Alpino with a face as round as a loaf, who sing at the top of your voice with your open hand to your mouth now that the front line is far away? Then strike up the song of the waiting sweetheart which we know isn't true, yet we sing it all the same, since illusions warm the heart, and one becomes sentimental in the evening after working all day at the trade of war. And then, if your throat gets dry, when we reach the hutments we will have a little cask of Valdobbiadene rolled out from the canteen tent, and your tin cup shall hold a brief, golden paradise, better than her golden hair, better than far-off home.

For Corporal Ferracin, who is always drunk in camp but sober and brave in a fight, and would be a sergeant now but for his failing, Corporal Ferracin says, as he pulls his long, curly beard:

"S'long as there's a drop o' wine, the wa-ar cud go on s'long as God wills."

And, in this blessed Val Sugana, Corporal Ferracin has no

difficulty in going on with the war till all the Austrians have been used up, in this happy Val Sugana which has its cellars full of wine and its barns full of sweet-smelling apples, and red-haired Monegat goes on patrol with his bottle and sandbag, to fill them. And we fight among empty villages against an enemy posted behind the cemetery wall or in the hotel garden: but when we have finished shooting, down we go scouting to the cellars of the parson of Santa Brigida, to see if his wine is better than the baron's.

And this is what happened to Campari. He was posted tonight, under a gentle snowfall, about an hour's walk beyond the lines, at Brustolai, a desolate heap of burnt and ruined houses in the rocky gorge that comes down from Armentera. The dark river cuts the dirty white of the ground. Beyond is the dead village of Marter; but there must be enemy in some of its houses this evening, as there were yesterday. The silence is unbroken except for some muffled oath, or for the irritable knocking of a boot against a rock when the wearer's feet are beginning to freeze. Suddenly the window of one of the houses nearest the river-bank is lit up—a little yellow square of light which mocks the armed party of hidden watchers on the other side of the water. We'll have to catch them, the muckers. The Brenta is crossed by a ford; the patrol surrounds the house. The movements are wary and cautious. But Pivotti cuts short the delays: with fixed bayonet he rushes head downwards into the house and cries: "Who goes there?" The others think: "Pivotti's copped a chap." So the lieutenant himself goes to look, and finds a driver from the Val Brenta, disheveled and bearded, who is gaping with wonder at all this alarm which has disturbed him while he was tapping the reddest wine in Marter from the most peaceful of casks.

For four days we have been resting in the town. Tonight we shall depart to do a bit of shooting, it seems. Tollot, Barp,

and Resentera will be sorry to leave their cellar, the three rascals, the quietest men in the whole company, who didn't need to be told twice to stay hidden in the cellar when Panarotta was firing, while the rest of the men ran into the inns of the place and stayed there till the police-sergeant arrived to dislodge them, and then they went away swearing, unless they could pull a bomb out of their trousers pocket to show him . . . but that is another story. But Tollot, Barp, and Resentera—nobody ever saw them. Always, all day long, at the bottom of their lair. The fact is that next door to the empty cellar where they were was a full one. So the first night they broke the door in, looked for a full cask, put a rubber tube into it, passed the tube through a hole in the door, and shut the door up again tightly. And the whole blessed day it was a suck for you and a suck for me, and never did red joy flow with such abundance down the throat of Alpini. Chosen friends used to come and share this secret good fortune: and sometimes the three friends (since they cultivated the sharp flower of irony) filled a mess-tin with that wine and took it round to be tasted by the inhabitants of the house, the owners of the cellar.

“Have a taste. See what good wine one gets in the army!”

And the owners would drink, and pronounce: “Good. It might be ours.”

And today the merry secret of Tollot, Barp, and Resentera has been passing in hilarious *sotto voce* down the closed ranks while the clerks call the roll and the major is nervously pulling his sailor's beard.

I do not regret the little lady who was my hostess, whose lips I kissed in the station road, because she has the look and smile of Heliodora (*sed lippis est oculis*). “*Si exsurgat adversum me praelium, in hoc ego sperabo.*”

January 25th

Leaning against the wall of the little hospital garden, two old women and three wizened old men are basking like lizards in the sun. The light shines sluggishly on the mountains in front;



a silvery burble of running water breaks the noonday silence. In the foreground of a large monastery hall, solemn and white—with enormous armchairs and large portraits of founders and benefactors—is the officers' mess. They are singing war songs. They are drinking *spumante* in honor of a guest. Whoever looks out of the windows open wide upon this triumphant scene of spring sees the three old men and two wizened old women warming themselves in the sun. But at the end of the corridor, in the damp, gray cell, the dying man is fighting his agony alone, unheeding.

At Malga Puisle, hauling guns with the whole company. The guns crawl up the frozen mule-track: a robust cheerfulness runs through the ranks, muscles braced to the effort, a merry contest who will arrive first, because at the top there is a captain of mountain gunners who has promised wine, and because the gunner lieutenant says that the territorials weren't fit to get the guns up.

Really we ought to be resting today, now that we are at rest. But it's our job, so what's the good of complaining? And what is a pain and distress to other men—when we relieved them, they stood there sweating and worn out on the path, their tunics unbuttoned and jibbing at orders—is an amusement for ours. Physical joy, to hoist such heavy guns up this saddle over this ice, which even the mules can't manage; exercise satisfying to muscles that have known nothing but work since they were born; pine-trees, rocks and sky, old acquaintances, have always seen these sons of the mountain at work; and it seems as if, living among these peaks, they aren't happy unless hard at work, and such is their love of effort and scorn for discomfort that when they are at play (at times when they have the order to do nothing) they hit hard enough to break each other's heads at the game of *civettino*—the very game shown in the Uffizi picture.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The game of shutting your eyes and guessing who hit you. The picture referred to is of the fourteenth century (anonymous), depicting this game.

Ferracin gives the word, the platoon attached to the ropes hauls forward the obstinate brute with a single pull—the good shell-belching brute that protects our advance.

Bonan, D'Incà's batman, is strolling along the road from Primolano to Feltre, with a little wine in his legs and a great longing for the family he is going to see again after so many months of war. What is that down there at the end of the road? A glittering motor, waiting. The mere notion of getting a ride in it would be mad. That is what generals ride in, majors, brass hats, those who send the yellow envelopes, after which come the alarms and orders to stand by. But close to it there is an old soldier, with a long white mustache like Pupo's, who is a driver. But Pupo has a little beard and short mustache, while this old soldier has only two long snow-white mustaches. He is standing still and looking at the motor. A patronizing gayety darts across the thoughts of the Alpino, who staggers a little as he comes along. So old as he is, they have taken him too to be a soldier! We'll ask him if he'll take a drop with me, the old boy.

Bonan has come up to the old soldier, and claps him on the shoulder. "So they've got thee too, old 'un, in the army?"

But his eye travels down to the old man's sleeve, and click! the terrified Alpino stiffens hastily to attention, with his fingers rigid at his hat and two eyes full of fear: a general, b—— it; and now amid the fumes of wine and fear he recognizes him, for he was his colonel in the 7th, when he was a recruit, many years ago. General Etna.

"Now he'll tick me off."

And the general smiles, and gives him a cigar: and then, since the puncture is mended and they can go on again, Bonan is made to get in, and there he sits puffing out his chest, triumphant, bursting with pride, coming back to the town beside the driver, his half-yard of cigar slanting from his mouth.

Night alarm. I am off with the special platoon to reënforce the infantry company above Roncegno. In the special platoon are collected the few men who are not on leave: the rest of the company has been given the word "Break off" all at the same time. It is made up of cooks, bootmakers, batmen, clerks, stretcher-bearers, drivers, veterans over thirty-five—all grumblers, and as difficult to please as all special tradesmen are when they are made to put aside their specialty.

"Get along, boys," I say, to chaff them. "Get along, volunteers," answers Forlin, who has the finest paunch of all the pioneers. And we proceed under the pouring rain, in the thick darkness, towards the outposts.

At Roncegno they take away my Alpini, who are put on to fatigue duty, and they send me up to Hill 1,000 with a platoon of infantry. As I pass Hill 900 I salute Mangili, who, in a devil of a temper, with a fortnight-old beard and the machine-gun section is also reënforcing the infantry, and nobody says anything of relieving him, and he is sure that the battalion has forgotten his existence.

"What are those skrimshankers of the battalion doing at Borgo?" he asks me.

"Making love," I reply, to rag him. Mangili has left his heart in a certain reconquered post-office. . . .

"Damned skrimshankers!" Mangili grumbles.

And so up to occupy the most impossible of hill-posts with these brave infantrymen, who are rather frightened at being commanded by an Alpino: and they stay up there all night fortifying the position, nicely behaved, glad that I find no fault with their work; and they carry out the most scurvy order cheerfully, such as going to advanced post a hundred yards higher up, right under the nose of the "Muchs."<sup>1</sup> And one of them hums *sotto voce*, very, very softly, so that it is impossible to hear it ten yards off:

*Povero fante,  
ne hai fatte tante.*

<sup>1</sup> I.e. Boches.

(Poor old infantry,  
You get all the dirty work.)

In the morning, as I am drying myself in the sun at the door of the four beams that make this little hut, the Germans suddenly begin to drop bombs on us. But I soon observe that, no matter how many they rain on us, they can't hit my domain for reasons of trajectory, but are all bound to fall on the machine-guns below. Great relief. There's another, waking a thousand echoing barks. One for you, Mangili!

Yes, Mangili must have overheard my thoughts, for he sends his batman to invite me down to eat macaroni with him.

*February, the day of the capture of Marter.*

Captain Nasci told the men:

"Boys, the cellars are full of wine. You found that out before I did. And I have got to put you in the cellars because the artillery's beginning to fire. But the prisoner taken by Lieutenant Fabbro says that the Austrians poisoned the wine before leaving the place. So be on your guard and don't drink."

"The blighters! Yes, sir."

And the captain's speech goes round the whole company, from the main guard to the little sentry-posts put to guard the town we took at dawn. All round a noise of shells and shrapnel. A light rain is dripping down. A few "ta-puns" from the mountain in front, as tiresome as a pianoforte: a mass of sticky mud adhering to clothes, boots, and hands, a nibble of biscuit. With a drop of wine, how well we should do sentry-go, searching with our eyes the treacherous undergrowth and the precipitous sides of the mountain!

"And so we can't drink the mayor's wine no more."

"Nor the priest's, neither."

"And not even the innkeeper's."

"If yer pisons yerself, yer identity disc'll go on leave."

"The captain's right."

Somebody taps the cask to try. The light red color makes their eyes sparkle.

"What a good smell!"

"D'yer think they really pisoned it?"

"The muckers."

But when I come back from pow-wow I find my platoon in the cellar steadily drinking.

"You fools, do you want to get poisoned?"

Cunning eyes twinkle round the circle.

"No, sir, we ain't afraid of pison now."

And they explain the dodge. While the officers were at pow-wow, the veterans of the company also held a pow-wow. They decided that lots should be drawn, and the man to whom the lot fell should try the effect of drinking a glass. "If he goes sick, we take him to the doctor straight, and he'll have some remedy for sure. If he's all right after an hour, all drinks." Since then all the guards, all the sentry-posts, have tasted the sweet wine of Marter: the wine of the priest, the wine of the mayor. The main guard tapped the enormous casks of the hotel, and De Lazzer went round all the cellars to find the best, that which was to be kept for the captain's mess.

So now the sentries, duly moistened, keep watch more contentedly over the rainy monotony of a country filthy with snow, search the tangles of the woods, and spy the deceitful, rocky slopes of the mountain from between their sandbags filled with earth.

All night we expected them to attack. A black night, pouring rain, a wind skirling through the valley. Standing on one's legs behind low walls made into improvised trenches; cocking one's ear at the noise of the rain, one's feet on the wet grass, water pouring off one's hair. We were left forlorn in the valley. On the right we had lost touch. Eighteen men to hold four hundred yards of line. If they come down from Malga Broi, they cut us off. Amen, and let's hope they attack us where we stand. At intervals luminous rockets yawned up on the horizon, a



surprised flash burst upon the mountain, lingered a little, and was swallowed in the darkness. Shots far-off and near by, rare but irritating. A hand-grenade, at midnight, thrown against the church, was a relief: they are attacking now. But nothing happened. Yet under the curtain of darkness the night was alive and threatening. The searchlights no longer swept the mountain. The murk enveloped us with insidious tenacity. All night long we watched, guarding the dead village. No bells punctuated our long wait. The night dragged on with its dull rhythm of rain. Every hour the sentries were relieved: the man going off guard whispered a few words to the newcomer, then went off, dripping wet, to a bed of sopping straw: the man on guard stood motionless under the rain, listening whether, among the shrieks of the wind, the hissing of the rain, and the mewing of a lost cat among the empty houses, he could hear the cautious tread of men through the wood.

At dawn the enemy attacked.

On reconnoissance amidst the brightness of the recent snow-fall, among the trees weighed down with whiteness, on all fours behind the low walls. A touch of laziness, for my fleabag this morning wrapped my limbs in such a gentle dampness, and yesterday the reconnoissance went badly, and I should be annoyed to get laid out today that the sun is so new and gives the mountain such a soft smoothness. I pass in review the names of my colleagues, every one of whom, as I think, should have been given this fatigue rather than I. Idiotic presentiments drag me backwards. The black spots made by these uniforms are cursedly clear against the snow. A nice fellow the major, to want me not to return till we've had a good shot at the snipers! And my cowardly mind of this morning makes me go dodging along behind the crumbled walls, reluctantly drawn on by the free-and-easiness of Pivotti, who is the point—because if I hadn't put him there today as well, he wouldn't have come.

The monologue of Pivotti, who is hewing wood in front of the company headquarters where he has been put for punishment because he refused to obey Corporal Sasso, who sent him on water fatigue: "Make me carry the dixies! Make me sweep out the hut! Make me go back to the ranks! But let him send me to cop Germans, let him send me, and I'll go every day, and I'll go in front with my haversack full of bombs. But don't let him go making me do the job of a terrible."<sup>1</sup>

And the chips of the trunk being massacred by his angry blows fly round like fragments of a bomb.

This evening while we were drinking Torcolato wine paid for by the Doctor Cimberle, who has lost his hair because somebody has stolen from his room a nice old engraving which he had got from a driver who had "found" it in a villa as full of holes as a sieve (but I'll tell that another time)—while we were drinking and singing

*Come porti i capelli bella bionda,  
io li porto alla bella marinar,*

(How do you wear your hair, my pretty maiden?  
I wear it in the jolly sailor way)

Campari got the order to take the whole of our company—strength fifty-eight men—to reënforce the Feltre battalion, which is rather hard pressed round Marter.

Out we go, in the night and the mud, to grope in the dark, with our sleepy men, towards the lines. At Marter, Campari reports to the major.

"Very good," says the major. "How many men have you? Fifty-eight? Not much. Very well. Send twenty-five with a non-commissioned officer to the advanced post beyond the bridge. It is a post where, if the Austrians attack them, no power in heaven will save them. Put twenty-five men there. Place your-

<sup>1</sup> "*La teribile*" = *territoriali*.

self with the rest of the company at my disposal, as strategic reserve—in that house near the railway, where my battalion headquarters was yesterday. Do you know it? Very well. There, you see, they have begun to register on it, and they've been dropping pills on us all day, so I had to clear out. A nasty place. One fell on the little hut next to it. All right, post yourself there with the rest of the company. Off you go."

So we tramp off in the mud and the dark towards the house near the railway with a vague anxiety, because, between the trap of the advanced post and the registered house, it strikes us that the poor 265th, with its strength of fifty-eight, has little to be cheerful about. He's got a sense of humor, that major. But there's a good stove in the house, and, if there is still this thick mist tomorrow, we'll light it and have roast chestnuts. And this thick layer of hay dries us splendidly. And the cask—God knows how there is still any left!—will be placed near me, and every section-leader will be authorized to come every hour with his mess-tin to get wine for his men. One *must* regulate things.

The men are basking in the feeble sun on the white chairs of the Grand Hotel at Roncegno, outside the portico, in sight of the snow-fluted valley. The enemy's guns are silent today on this side: they are doing a hate somewhere else, and the men are commenting on the rumbles like Manzoni's peasant. But up on the cornice are the marks of yesterday's hate. The big drawing-room, with a frescoed frieze by Soffici, has two enormous holes in the ceiling; and a drip of melting snow is making a melancholy complaint. The noble park is all holes, torn-up oaks are lying flat on the paths. The hotel is in a thorough mess, the furniture all upside down, a scene of ruin and bombardment, and now the rain which comes in from the riddled roof is the worm in its flesh. On the walls of a topsy-turvy room there is still the irony of such a notice as: "Visitors are requested not to take the magazines out of the reading-room."



We are drunk with sun and youth this morning. We have roamed through the park, we have roared our Bacchic songs:

*Il buon vino fa lieto il core  
il buon vino scaccia il dolore  
e d'una sbornia non si muore . . .*

(Drink and be merry, that's our motto,  
Good wine sends dull care to pot-o,  
No one dies of getting blotto . . .)

Tomorrow we shall be underneath again, and life is a gift that will be taken back from us. Morandi had his cap shot through this morning on Hill 1,000. The lieutenant of the Feltre got a hole right in his carcase and his right lung penetrated. And the smell of the pine-wood fills our men, still unhurt, with dare-devilry. Who thinks of the skrimshankers? Yet there were some who seemed to me marked for a higher destiny, and now are laboriously plodding along in the sticky toils of cusheydom. But we take our fill of this ephemeral life of ours voluptuously. And that touch of wind-up that comes sometimes is a fine condiment for that enjoyment. These torn trees, these ruined houses, these violated properties—and they were insured and protected by so many melancholy documents, which an old man is keeping in the archives—all this is a good setting for our vigil of destruction and renovation. And at least, if I lose an arm over it, somebody has lost a country house.

Martinelli is jumping from one table of the big drawing-room to another, Frescura is balancing the flower-vases on his head, Pagani is trying to sink into the sofa like a man who has an income of a million. Let us loll in the Viennese armchairs, let us draw up a ridiculous little table, let us pretend that it is now tea-time, with the large hotel gay with youthful ladies and glossy gentlemen all cleanly shaved. Zanella shall make us the tea in the little skier's cooker. *Causions littérature*. Wasn't there an English review in that corner? A pity there's such a cursed

whistling through the broken panes. Where, I wonder, is now the old Viennese baron who two years ago was settling his diplomatic behind into this armchair? I'm sure a flirtation began in that little nook, and was concluded in the discreet shades of the park: but now any one who goes into the park in the dark has to be careful where he steps.

A whistle, a roar. And then a shower of plaster, a disruption and avalanche of planks and beams. That one fell on the hotel. "*Sonnez, s'il vous plaît—un coup pour le garçon, deux pour la femme de chambre.*"

The 65th is leaving for Borgo to rest. (This means they will send it off suddenly tomorrow—night alarm, not even time to dry one's boots—to some other hill where an advanced post has been surprised or an enemy patrol observed, but that is the kind of thing that happens every day.) The men file along with their demijohns, their bottles, their mess-tins full of wine, the roast chestnuts in the saucepan, a petticoat over their arms, and a top-hat crowning their packs. Their poor little booty of war. From Borgo to Marter the road is marked with a red streak on the snow. At the machine-gun post of the Feltre battalion at Ponte del Zaccon is the dressing-station; those lads brought out a cask, opened it, and all the soldiers who pass by got a cup of wine to take them on their way.

A procession of dark figures in the crepuscular grayness of snow and mist, a burden of boredom and silence, a chilly damp that has been biding its time on our tunics all day now goes right through them.

"Ta-pun!" A battle alarm seems such a ridiculous thing in the deep softness of the snow upon the buried valley.

I was on patrol in the rain; three other patrols on my flanks; one was surprised—it walked right into a nest of snipers. Sudden bursts of firing checkered the wood, a regular silly fight, with

wounded, with no idea what was going on; and now lazily snuggled in my fleabag, afternoon funk, thinking over the episodes of the morning. For all your struggling, it gets you in the end. To think that I am condemned to this eternal alternation. The goodness of life which delicately tempts my reluctant senses with pimping recollections. Other Februaries when I went along in the timid sun without objective or hurry, and on my return a soft armchair to ease me as I scribbled in the margin of my book (mountain-climbs were parentheses which one knew would be closed).

Forest, rain, alarm, jumping up from the warmth of the fleabag because a hail of shots has whipped the night—these are things I picture to myself with terror. "*Si exsurgat adversus me praelium . . .*" And a French novel I found here depicts happy realms of bodily safety and luxury. Lord, deliver me from the demon of noontide!

In the warm room of my brother officer in the Supply, tea carefully made in the elegant teapot, red tablecloths. Voices of far-off women; images of desire gleam from out of the pipe-smoke; at the bottom of the glass of cognac is the warmth of a voluptuous child. Outside, the drip-drip of the eaves. And the sense that this vigil will be very short.

At night, sudden orders; we are going back to the outposts, in the raw brightness of the moon. This time we have got to take a certain height, the devil of a well-known hummock, of which my old fellows are chattering in a low voice, for it will be a hard nut to crack. And while I march along the well-known road, with my men grave and serious, the officers of the territorials, who have their mess in my house, *causent littérature*. On through the white landscape shut in by black, woolly trees. We enter the cobblestoned village, passing caves where fires are lit, and round them black, peaceful shadows of soldiers indifferent to our march: we come out, we march again through the snowy

landscape wrapped in a hostile silence, towards scattered shots not far away.

*March 18th.*

Cleaned my mind of the funk of that rainy afternoon when the captured French novel described paradises of sloth, and I cleaned it in a regular good fight, a long day of sun, a long night in which I watched with arid eyes the implacably slow course of the moon, punctuated by the gunfire, feeling hidden danger creeping all round me. And now very jolly going down again to rest, with the men who fought well, and who are quietly recalling the names of those who fell up there. A few stray shots. The thirty-six hours' fast, two nights of wakefulness, no longer worry us. We fix our eyes on the distances as though they possessed them; we gaze into the future as though we had marked it with our will.

But when you get to headquarters and learn the names of the other killed, and Frescura's nasty wound, and then suddenly an aeroplane squirts out two bombs five yards away, and you still don't know how you remained unhurt (after an eternity of daze you hear coming to you from measureless distances the voice of your brother officer, stretched out flat on the ground beside you: "Monelli, are you hit?"—"I'm just seeing"), then you think that the sense of respite is deceptive.

The medical captain, in a frenzy of rage, hurls the plates of the house at the aeroplane which has dropped its eggs on us.

Major Bosio of the Feltre battalion, to which I have been posted these days, has an edifying hatred for papers and office work. He deals with the official correspondence standing by the stove. This letter? Not urgent? Not private? Into the stove it goes without even being opened. He does read the urgent and private ones, but then he puts them into the pocket of his tunic, and the adjutant has to go and empty them when he is sleeping if he wishes to keep up his files at all.

"At least let me register them," the adjutant implores.

"Leave the register clean—it hasn't done you any harm," says Bosio, laughing.

"But the division insists on an answer."

"Answer: 'At this moment enemy shell destroyed stationery chest stop impossible reply stop signed Bosio.'"

After the fight of the other day at the well-known hummock I went to him to report. At that moment the adjutant was bringing him a telephone message from the division which ran as follows: "Please inform me number of rounds S.A.A. fired in yesterday's engagement."

"Answer as follows, Manaresi," says Bosio. "Answer as I dictate: '44,252, and three misfires.' Don't forget the misfires."

"I've got a little job for you," says the major, who meanwhile pulls his beard several times, joins the two sharp points together, and lengthens the left one to have a good look at it. Then, stand to, the men are to fall in under the colonnade, with arms, and be in readiness.

Pivotti, with a blue ribbon on his tunic, gained on the Freikofel, and ten days prison gained in cantonments, takes a rag out of his pocket, winds it round the cleaning-rod, gives a quick wipe out to the barrel, ports arms, eases springs. He stands the rifle against the wall, and, turning to a little group of wondering men who are not fighting in the war, says: "Look'ee, I cares for that there now more than for me rations."

We buried our latest dead tonight. We carried them on our shoulders in the white coffins which Zamai made, through the winding lanes. The men gathered outside the doors of the cantonments, and the cooks popped smoky faces out of the caves bright with flames. The mountains were chiseled by the restless beams of the searchlights, and rang with gunfire. And while the chaplain rapidly intoned the Latin words of the



burial service, a rocket opened its umbrella in the black sky.

You are not yet dead, you dead of ours who turned up your toes on patrol, with not even time to say to your comrade who was attending to his own job: "Say good-by to the old woman for me." When in this cheerful valley the roses flower again and the harvests succeed one another and the fair-haired maidens pick the vintage, when the peasant, undoing the laborious tangles of wire, surrounds his little plot with thorny hedges, then indeed, in the white cemetery, you will be dead, clean forgotten by new, imperious life, as you lie so far away from the other departed of your family. Today the captain, whom we brought down that day in September shattered by a bomb, is waiting for you to report. His headstone is not far away, in the cemetery of Strigno, with its simple words: "To Captain Fausto Bianchi—who fell in battle—from the Alpini." And tell the captain that his company is just the same, and jumps to it, and is not afraid, if its number goes up, to come and join him where he serenely sleeps. You are not yet dead, today. You are the tired comrades who rest after a hard day of outpost duty; you are still with us, but so dead tired that the alarm does not rouse you and the lieutenant goes out to fight without you; you are like the comrade who has been left as sentry over the packs and whom we don't see among us when the bullets begin to whizz. And some of the men think: "Ain't Toni lucky! Gettin' orderly duty today." (That is, unless there happens to him what happened to Gallina, who got three fingers blown off by a shell-splinter while on orderly duty. It's true he goes back to civil life and has finished with the wind-up, but how is he going to work in the fields now?)

And now the company is dribbling out up a nice, cheerful road among the pines, towards the white summits. Now that they must have need of us up there, they are taking us away from the bottom of the valley, where we have been fighting all the winter, and where we had almost forgotten we were Alpini, going from one village to another and living in sacked country houses. Rumors of war are now beginning on the peaks too: we

are again Alpini, good for fighting up there. And the infantry is coming down from its winter's rest to its war in the valley-bottom.

We are going back to the little huts buried by ice, to the sting of the storms, to the din of the great torrents. Our home, our kingdom. Good-by to the last houses, good-by to the last civilians, good-by to the last women. Of the female sex, up there, we shall only have Regana or Miesnotta, or some other restless mule. Tòrmena and Ferracin, say good-by to the last inns, where it is not true that you used to get tight, as the profane say, but where, with the help of a liter of red wine, you regained so many good things you missed—your bed, your little ones, your home, the hope of getting back there after the war, your pals in the mine, the jokes of your recruit days. And good-by to the sweet spring, which redecks the valley with almond-blossom, weds the campanulas to the second-line wire, and lays a velvet of moss upon the rocks. Up there, behind the white parapets, among the gleaming communication trenches and in the deceptive softness of the snow, we shall find again the unbroken winter which etches in such purity the outlines of the mountains and lets down the curtain of snowflakes in front of the advanced posts.

We are going back to other dangers, there is a smell of other combats in the air; but we are as cheery as though we were going to rest. We climb up an old acquaintance, the mountain that was taken last September. Memories crowd upon us. There stood the major's tent (a fine fellow; it was the most conspicuous); there those five infantrymen died the night of the blizzard; there we rapidly dug, in the rigor of the night, the first trench that was to protect us from the artillery-fire at dawn. And, little by little, as we mount, other old friends greet us from beyond the lower hills, steep walls against which we broke our heads, on which we firmly grasped our hold. Here and there we left our dead to hallow the stages of our advance. And some fell so far in front that the ground where they lie is contested, and not even the boldest patrols go beyond them.

April.

I accompanied to Feltre the oldest Alpini of the companies, with about twenty mules, which we are handing over to the transport of the new Pavione battalion. The old men have done with war—in the company, at least; they are going to be drivers, and it is fine reward for these men of forty who have been a year in the front line while their contemporaries in the infantry, with their red “pipes,”<sup>1</sup> were tempting their wives in the Venetian villages, merry with wine. My old Prade is among them, who behaved so gallantly though in a dreadful funk that night in March; and there is Boschet, whom I saw leaving Feltre for the war in July, dead drunk, his wife carrying his pack and stick, and wiping the sweat off his forehead. We march slowly in the April sun, along the road thick with houses and inns; the little boys run up cheekily and yell as we pass by; the girls laugh spitefully at that procession of gray-haired soldiers.

In the hut hot water burbles on the stove, and the fleabag on the camp-bed opens its promising white lips. On the other side of the plank partition are the men. Through the cracks there comes the warm reek and the slow song that entices sleep.

*In mezzo al mar ci sta un tavolino,  
si mangia si beve del vino,  
in mezzo al mar . . .*

(Far out to sea there stands a little table,  
Where one eats and drinks as long as one's able,  
Far out to sea . . .)

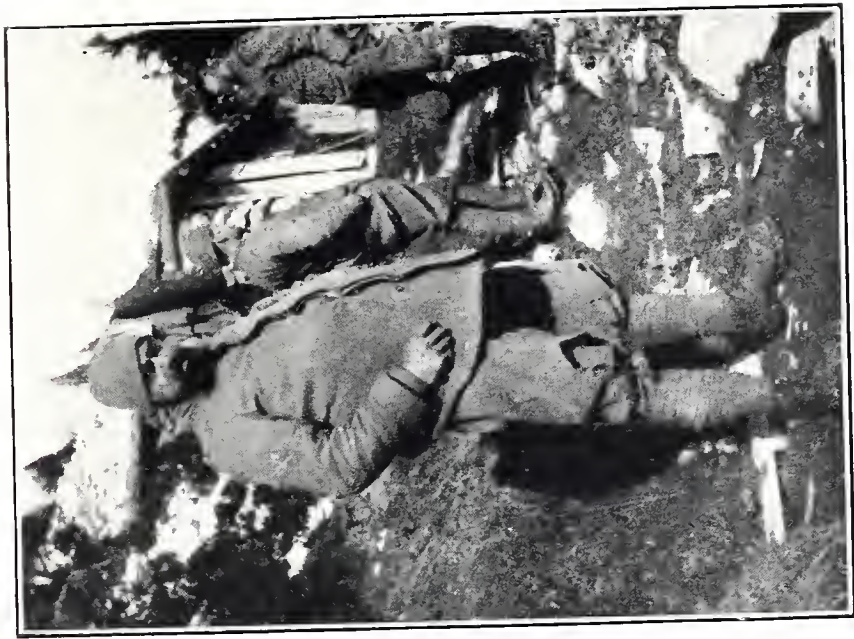
Outside, the blizzard is letting loose its fierce wolf-cubs; shakes the wooden walls, and drives the smoke down into the room at intervals. But we are comfortable inside. I'll tell you a sentimental story, my boy, while the coffee helps to keep us awake. A little adventure at Venice on short leave, and she was fair,

<sup>1</sup> The territorials wear red pipe-shaped patches on their collars.





SERGEANT DAMIN



"The finest paunch of all the pioneers."



GROUP INCLUDING COLONEL RAMBALDI AND DR. CIMBERLE



FATIGUE PARTY BRINGING UP CABLE

and had a scent of sunshine and repressed desires. . . . A drop of cognac, of *aqua vitae*, in your coffee? Yes, a whole cup. The wind comments by knocking at the creaking windows. Love of distant earth, the liqueur glass. . . . Here's fun!

But I shall have to go out and have a look at those poor sentries, who are discounting the few sins of their youth in this demonic night. Hardly has one put one's nose out of doors than the hut immediately disappears, swallowed up in the level white obscurity, the wind and snow twist shrieking round you; it seems as though your clothes and skin are dissolving in this tempest which pierces right down to the tiniest veins of your heart. In the blinding whiteness, in the whirlwind that stifles one's breath, one crawls towards the crest, groping along the communication trenches, almost chock full of snow. At intervals the wind falls: an astonished silence spreads around; from the valley the voice of the torrent rises again; a jagged rent in the fog reveals a chilly star or two. Suddenly the hail of ice-flakes breaks out afresh, the shrieks of the wind imitate the whining of a coming shell: the whole mountain is a volcano of ice and is shaggy with furious clouds. There is now no trace of a path, everything looks a whirling sameness; there is no slope, there is no level; one moves through a yielding labyrinth of lurking dangers, and the savage peal of the wind roars in one's ear temptations of dizziness, of giving up, of letting oneself go down and down for ever, and awaiting in that soft bed a marvelous sleep. . . . A nice night to surprise guards and advanced posts. But when I reach the sentry at the entrance to the covered trench and I wish him good luck, the man replies calmly:

"Never fear, sir."

Then one can go back reassured to the hut, and, while the song goes on more listlessly,

*In mezzo al mar ci sta una sirena,  
lo zaino fa male alla schiena,  
in mezzo al mar . . .*



(Far out to sea there sits a pretty siren;  
My ruddy pack is like a ton of iron,  
Far out to sea . . .)

we will write a sentimental letter to that adventure of ours.

A friend of mine has been killed in war. The best of that lively band who are now doing their bit scattered among the mountains and along stricken river-banks (but there's the man who is plodding in the tortuous way of cusheydom). He was the best, the one who often gave me clear and wise advice, and was my devoted companion on the great mountain ways when we were quite unaware that climbing them was an anticipation and a preparation—who left for the Carso without swank or excitement, humbly, yet who, being in the third category, when he had to choose the arm in which to become an officer, chose the infantry. And now what is left of his quiet love for the mountains, of his soldier's uniform, of his clear spirit of sacrifice, what but his shell-torn body, laid to rest in the cemetery of Quisca?

Today I shudder at that death so far away, as though I had been at his side in the fight and had heard his cry when hit. It is not the hundred left shattered here and there on the soil of the battlefield, but this one who warns me that this war desired by our youth, to which we came as to the finest adventure of our lives, is no pleasant game; that the sickle of death reaps near me too, behind this Chinese wall of unknown, heedless men; that I too may get the bullet that plunges one into nothingness—nothing forever, neither this coolness of wind nor this tenderness of blue—the bullet I still don't want to think of.

*Et ecce afflictio spiritus.* Today a weariness of war clouds my spirit, an anxiety that it may go on too long, no other vision before my eyes but a sequence of black and white keys, fighting and rest, an infernal music without end, until the inevitable sacrifice. Today these shells which mark the time for me as I

climb to the top irritate me. I have the stupid presentiment that my friend's death is only a beginning and a warning; and I should make a poor speech to the men, today, on the necessity of being killed.

The white-enameled mountains leap up with us into the glory of the sun: the plain, scoured by the wind, lies comfortably between two black buttresses. The wind is drunk with plunder: the bursting shells dash snow into one's face, whistle, break against the impassible snow, and seem to be cutting harmless capers on the mule-track. But the shrapnel bursts sonorously against the pure, pale sky, and that mountain-gunner and his mule up there have disappeared with a well-aimed shot. It is obvious that, now they have got the range, they will go on. Yes, and that is where I've got to go. What need had the major to go strolling right up to the top to see if they were really firing? But he, with his little beard that tells the weather, and his solid legs, breathes this air of battle as if it were the balmy waft of pine-trees. Yes; but he has not this death between him and his courage, as I have today.

Here the new season still keeps its winter colors—white, black and blue. And it often loses its temper with us, and a melancholy winter of fog takes its place, forces the eyes of the sentries to become sharper, and lingers in certain little valleys or in certain hollows of the hills. But today, when May is wearing for us a mourning robe of tattered clouds, spring has come with a bunch of flowers which Deòn the driver has wound round the ears of Rondèl. Good day, you tricky mule! Good day, say the flowers, which smell of saddle and stable, but have the color of the plain. And, see, the fog clears, and the emerald of the valley is shining down below, as deceitful as my lady's eyes.

On a brisk morning one drinks in the sun rapturously; gleams of light brim over the crystal rim of the mountains. In the blue

sky the white and red cloudlets of the bursting shells blend in cheerful harmony, and the perfect music exultantly emphasies this feast of color, which seems an integral element of the May morning's splendor.

New men arrived this morning to fill the gaps. Ranks gray against the light drift of valley mist; proud words from the major. The newcomers, men of thirty, recruits of the third category, many of them come to this war across the ocean from the tranquil bosom of their exotic families, look him in the face. They hear the words of country and of the need to die for it (do they think of the humiliations suffered in foreign lands?). They fix their bright eyes on the mountain-crest, and know that beyond it is the enemy whom it is their duty to kill, that a brave man must not be afraid. That is what the chaplain tells them too. What more do they want to know? An obscure sense of necessity emanates from things, and they don't dispute it—the same sense that drove them over the hills to earn their living, and which came and took them one day to give them a uniform and a rifle. Country is this return to the mountains that saw them born, this finding their mother's dialect once more on the lips of their comrades. They recognize the trees, the bare slopes, and the morains of stones. The land where one talks a foreign tongue was not like this; this has a different smell, a different color, and sticks with closer contact to the body which touches it. It is the fatherland. And tonight they will mount guard with calm assurance, their hearts as stout in the tricky moonlight as the masses of their mountains, and their longings for their families like those they felt in the distant lands they sought to earn their bread, and death seeming no more terrible than that which lurks in the mines.

The perfect nineteen-year-old child far away sends me her photograph and asks for mine. *Et vidi quod hoc quoque esset vanitas.*



The mountain is all clothed in mist, and the faces of the men look like the opaque profiles of bonzes on a Chinese porcelain. We know it already. Soon the mist will condense to snow, a persistent, granular snow-shower; then the wind will begin to blow right through us, and from the green and gold plain they will see our mountain cheerfully crowned with a ruffled white mane. In the evening this mane will be golden, and if I were down below where the mules are I should compare it to the golden head of hair belonging to the nineteen-year-old child far away, with her shingled head.

*Fili di sole tiepido—  
sciacquare succhiare dell'onda  
pigra sulla spiaggia calda—  
piccoli seni compressi  
dalla tunichetta azzurra—  
malinconia di non esserci  
che viene dalle lettere ardite  
dove tenta inutilmente la mia  
lontananza.*

(Shafts of warm sun falling—  
Wavelets sucking and splashing  
Lazily on the warm beach—  
Tight pressed little bosoms  
Swelling the azure tunic—  
How sad that I am not with her,  
I think, when I read her letters  
That tempt so boldly and vainly  
Her distant lover.)

But since I am in it, I will make other comparisons, if I have the leisure to do so: I shall compare myself to Falstaff in the rout of fairies armed with stings, or to the naughty boy who has stirred up a wasps' nest. But I know too that at last the fog will break into a joyous gallop and circle other summits in the dance, the green and gold plain will smile to us again, and the mountains, freshly powdered, will emerge all round, in

their blue dressing-gowns. And we shall salute our enemies again up there on the steep crest with its garland of barbed wire.

"Good morning, you dirty dogs! You didn't play your piece last night. The storm was playing it. Over with you."

And they will answer us in discreet Latin:

*"Porco alpino taliano, alpino caput!"*

Having thus exchanged suitable morning greetings, we shall begin once more making ourselves nuisances to one another. . . .

Until the evening comes, a fine evening that steals gently over the sky, marking the azure spaces with its gleaming hob-nails. The wind has fallen, a frost without shivers spreads over the snow, and the sentries of the advanced post arrange the hand-grenades within easy reach. Suddenly, from the enemy peak, comes wheezing the slow, drawn-out sound of a concertina: the invisible torrent in the valley accompanies it, the advanced posts on either side stand stock-still to listen. The tender warmth of far-off home-fires, in the Venetian *Malga*<sup>1</sup> or the hut of the *puszta*,<sup>2</sup> far-away women who have been waiting so long, the smell of May in the sods of the far-off field. . . .

The music ends.

"Good night, *porci taliani*."

*"Bona note, fioi di cani."*

Silence. And now, in velvet slippers, the hidden danger creeps round, tries the eyes of the sentry with fingers of sleep, watches the dugouts of the advanced posts. The night swarms with fears; the stars look curiously on from their turquoise stalls. Shall we give the stars a performance tonight? Mystery—secret. We should have to ask the telephone wires, which hum all night long, but the telephone wires are honest functionaries, and keep to themselves things they ought not to talk about. Perhaps the rockets know, which rise saucily up from the dark heights . . . but our friends the rockets go up in a hurry, give a glance round,

<sup>1</sup> *Malga* = a steading on a mountain pasture.

<sup>2</sup> *Puszta* = plain (Hungarian).

and fall down again in a dignified silence. And nothing more is heard but a distant rumbling of guns on the plateau.

The nights of advanced-post duty, when, tired of counting the rockets that go up from Valpiana and of trying to locate the firing from the valley on the map, one comes back to the dugout and begins to read the newspaper from A to Z. One gets curious impressions, for instance, when one reads in the trade advertisements: "Young man twenty-two exempt service wants post," or when one picks out of the local news little paragraphs such as: "At the Academy of Moral Sciences a paper was read by . . ." Well, think: those prosy old gentlemen in a quiet little room, tightly closed, drinking in some learned rigmarole; and how funny it would be if by some strange chance one of these six-inch shells which lace our sky fell in the middle of them! What were they reading a paper about? About the "custody of servants not appearing on sale of property." Yes, it is well that somebody should be bothering about such things, while we are upsetting boundaries and confines, making trenches of boundary walls, making huts of the woods and the great felled trees, and clearing away the shepherds' huts where they spoil our field of fire. The enemy, on his side, burns villages: too often leaping tongues of flame lash the nights of the valley. But from our fierce destroying might will come renovation, and the vines now growing wild will again produce the wine dear to wiseacres. We destroy and pass onwards. We pass onwards, and shall be destroyed: but after us will come those who will become learned and cavil about questions of inheritance.

Meletus said to Socrates—I assert this on the evidence of Alfredo Panzini—"If everybody went to war, who would be left to honor those who go to war?"

But this is grousing. Bright sunshine has suddenly arrived, accompanied by a savage roar of shell-fire. The whole valley echoes with it, and the perfect blue of the sky is clustered with

little cloudlets. In the intervals of the din one hears down below, in the Adige valley, a ceaseless muffled rumbling.

We are without news. But we know that the enemy offensive is beginning which has been announced these last few days from a hundred sources, from *communiqués*, from prisoners, from the mule-drivers, who always know everything in advance. The battle rages from the glaciers to the grassy slopes of the Dolomites. We, with our unknown comrades, scattered over all the heights, on the watch at every pass, are palpitating with anxiety. And when a perfect stillness that seems a trap suddenly enwraps us, we are trembling spectators of the battle on the neighboring mountain, cannon-smoke and filth belched out on to the snow.

Danger threatens from men and weather. The clear sky grows murky, clouds gather, melt into rain by day, into blizzard and hail by night, or linger in perpetual wet mist. The ground, the tents, the blankets, one's clothes, are all alike sopping. And now we have little leisure to observe the battle on the other heights, for the feast of St. Barbara has descended on us too.

The mules no longer bring letters and wine; they bring rifle ammunition and bombs: the driver no longer wants to have a chat; he discharges his baggage in haste and down he goes again by the mule-path, battered by the "overs" that miss the summit; and it's no laughing matter for Pupo, though we laugh as we see him lolloping down pulling the jibbing mule after him furiously, and more preoccupied with the descent than the bombardment. The men, leaning back against the wall of the hut in the illusion that its shelters them, follow the good mules with loving eyes—the comrades in our rough warfare, the only link between us and the green and gold world of the cushey valley.

Damin tells me that Antelao, the most troublesome mule in the Feltre battalion, was rewarded for valor in Lybia for his calm demeanor under fire, and was given a double ration of corn, and goes on getting his double ration even now that he is no longer in the army, for he has been discharged and sold to a carter in Lamon. Facchin says that mules can stand to atten-

tion—they draw up their heads, prick their ears, and their eyes shine; and they stand still like that in the stable when the major comes in and the stable orderly takes it into his head to shout “Shun!”

Such are the kindly and cheerful comments as the caravan goes bouncing down the mule-track, the drivers with their hats so squashed that they look conical, the feather at the trail, the crest over one ear, musket slung, gray hairs in the thick beard—and the mules cautiously picking their way down, giving little sideways glances to see if there isn’t a bit of grass to crop, but otherwise serious and calm as befits animals who are on campaign, are enrolled on the King’s registers, bear the names of mountains and valleys, and are the providence of those poor Alpini up above, who might well die of hunger or have to abandon the summit if it wasn’t for them. Gallant creatures, who do not go sick in the morning even if the Supply has cut down their rations, and who carry the wine firmly on the pack-saddle (all but that mule who carries the Chianti, and, impossible as it seems, always falls down and breaks one bottle in every case of twenty-five), who carry the water-skins and the provisions, the coils of barbed-wire and ammunition, the chaplain and the wounded man, and, when the lieutenant isn’t looking and the climb is steep, drag up their drivers clinging to their tails—and they don’t bray, and they don’t kick unless they are really feeling vicious, and then they kick honestly and tell one first with a little glint of the eyes, and so much the worse for him who does not understand; and they go on unheeding amid shell-fire and blizzard, and find the path in night and fog, and when shrapnel bursts over their heads they stand up against the wall with an intelligent look and wait for the driver to say, “*Arri!*” and they don’t ask for relief.

*May 23rd.*

Our turn has come. The drivers gave us some hasty, unconfirmed news of it: news of retreat, the plateau surrounded,



Cima Dodici lost. We heard the rumble of distant bombardments, we saw, at night, the flashes of the guns firing on the plateau.

Then came the din of the fights at the bottom of the valley, always nearer, always more in rear; and a three days' bombardment upon us, stupid and irregular, which killed the men in the dugouts and the mules on the path.

And not a word of news: but three days ago the fortress gun went, and yesterday the battery of 75's, and tonight the mountain guns too. Then a company of battalion was urgently hurried down to the valley; and this morning we are left alone, one company on the battered summit; and here on our flanks and down in the valley the attack, and then the distress of thinking that if they don't hold out in the valley—but they are brave Alpini boys of Monrosa, thank heaven!—we are caught like rats in a trap.

That's the difference between us and the rest of the army. They march away, in fours, two deep, anyhow, with baggage and cook-boxes and tools following, block up the roads, retire far away from this hell and this anxiety, and spread about the rumors which the drivers bring up, albeit reticently, and every time with a cheerful surprise at finding us still here. But if tomorrow we tread on the flying enemy's heels in the glory of the counter-attack, they will be on the same footing as we. Amen.

So Cima Dodici has fallen? But we see it behind us, and even have to twist our necks to look at it. Then what about us? And Italy?

We have got to stay here, at all costs, till dark tonight. To look on impotently at the descent of the enemy battalions from the heights opposite, and not even a mountain popgun to knock them over with! This morning we repulsed them, and our flanks are free too, it appears; but the day drags on with implacable slowness in a sky full of light, and the agony of waiting is all the more bitter for the sense of disaster that possesses us, without our daring to guess at all its horror.

At midday I hop up to headquarters to get news. At the en-



trance of the hut the major, his sharp eyes marked by sleeplessness, his pipe out, is twisting his grayish beard.

"Come here. Have you made your examination of conscience? This evening we shall all be surrounded."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes, I tell you. Advanced posts—yes, posts of honor (imitating the voice of an officer of divisional headquarters). 'I beg to point out to you, if you do not hold fast till tonight, you endanger the retirement.' So we hold fast, and then we get caught, and we get all the blame and the jeers." A hearty oath came to help the stubborn words to come out.

"And then they get all the glory and the dough. While we, because we stay clinging on here, by teeth and nails, while they wallop us, because we are good old beetle-crushers<sup>1</sup> with hard skulls, shall go to Mathausen with broken legs—if we are lucky. And when peace comes and I go into a drawing-room that lady will be there again who said with dainty disdain: 'There's that Alpino chap.' Don't let's think of it. Come here, I've got the remedy for the dumps. Have you a sweetheart?"

"Oh, yes."

"That's bad, for you'll be betrayed—you too. But this here, my boy, is a friend who doesn't betray. Drink. Drink again. I've drunk five or six, and now I'm calmer. At first I was feeling blue, you know; blue as that powder which always goes off at the wrong time. Have another."

Then, with the red sun in my body, warmth in my ideas, to see with greater optimism whether the evening is making up its mind to darken this bright sky in which a more careless sun is traveling than that which obeyed Joshua—and if not, if they attack us before dark, we'll try at least to lay out some of them, to spin out the time a bit, and then perhaps the division may succeed in getting its office papers all into safety.

And so at last, at night, in little bunches, we go rolling down through the dark wood, assembling at Malga Val Pra beyond the valley; safe in our rear, for Garbari da Pèrgine is defending

<sup>1</sup> The Alpini are nicknamed *Scarponi* because of their big mountain boots.

it: he asked for that dangerous task because, he said, he knew the positions well.

Bieno is burning too.

A new glow, indeed, is added to that which spreads from the valley, a harsher luminosity which gives weird shapes to the tree-trunks in the woods and enormously enlarges the profiles of the mountains. The retreat has proceeded without hindrance so far, under the subtle iciness of rain that creeps all over one's body, soaks the blankets, and weighs down the greatcoat: an oppressive march, and sorrowful, for up there on the crest black against the copper sky we are abandoning, without the necessity of combat, the fortified lines, the huts, a whole tumultuous two months' life spent in strengthening our position and harassing the enemy. We are leaving up there the dead and the rustic graves, our memories and a piece of life so intense that its amputation hurts as much as the scraping of flesh off our bones. But our task of protection is ended: we have got to go, towards an uncertain future, an absolute night in which we can neither hear anything nor look ahead.

At the river, near the little bridge, two black shadows, motionless.

"Who are you?"

"Monrosa battalion. We've got to blow up the bridge."

"There's still a half company to come. They are coming down in échelon."

"Very good, sir. We must blow 'un up in an hour's time."

On the other side, at the beginning of the mule-track which goes up again over the woody shoulder, a little group of men resting, tin cups tapping against the stones of the stream, the crunching of biscuits in strong teeth.

"Forward, boys. What have you got there?"

"A dead man, sir. Panato Giovanni."

"Is he dead already?"

"Yessir. At Malga Lopetto he give out a great sigh, and a bit later he went down like a log."

The last man hit today. A stray artillery shot, fired haphazard on the mountain, had smashed his side. But we must carry him away, dead though he is, so that the enemy do not plunder him or leave him to rot amid the snow and the junipers. We'll make him a cross, and write his name on it, and the number of his company, and he shall sleep in consecrated earth, in our midst: in the morning he shall still hear Collet carrying coffee to the advanced posts and shouting: "*Moka!*" when the sky is clearing in the east and the sentries peel their eyes still more, for it is the time when the Germans attack.

"Signor lieutenant, I'm afeared the dead man is going to be our billeting quartermaster: he's gone to the other world to prepare a place for us."

A muffled laugh: back go the cups to the haversacks, a tinkle of metal striking metal; the short caravan begins to climb again.

"Why be us retiring, sir?"

"Oh, well, we're ordered to."

"Sir, Patricelli tells me they pigs of Germans be come up to Cima Undese and Cima Dodese. Then they're *all* right."

"Sir, why didn't we stop on top of Sètòle? With hand-grenades and rifles, God damn it, I'd like to see them muckin' Boches capture the position!"

They are right to ask. But what do they know, what do I know, of what is happening? Nothing. We fight, we go on, we stop, a mere number in the enormous mass that sways and maneuvers over this mountain front from the glaciers to the morains of the Dolomites—and in our hearts a dull fury, a bitter pain at neither knowing nor seeing; shadows in the depths of a dark valley which pass on with no answer to their questions, fleeing from an unknown evil, hurrying to God knows what worse one. A flock of sheep. Tomorrow they will say to us: "Halt, and die here." And here we shall bite the snow, ignorant whether it has been any use or not, whether the sacrifice has not at least meant a gain of two hundred yards, at least a village saved from bombardment, or an opportunity to restore the fight at a more lucky moment. Yes, with hand-grenades and rifles,

and with that incitement which seems to come from the steadings below, where their wives are attending to the trying labors of men, they would certainly have held the enemy, these grouching Alpini of mine. But cipher telegrams and codes and mysteries buzz along the wires by night, when we are watching at our posts; and there in fine castle far, far away, muffled in soft carpets and hangings, an officer writing, a typist copying, an orderly going out, a colonel who curses; our mythology, the mysterious gods who spin the threads of our destiny.

This is war. Not the risk of death, not the red girandole of the shell that blinds and buries in a roaring vortex (*"Quando si leva che intorno si mira—tutto smarrito della grande angoscia"*<sup>1</sup>), but feeling ourselves such marionettes in the hands of an unknown showman often freezes the heart, as though the hand of death had clutched it.

Stuck fast in the trench until the order for relief comes, as suddenly as a cannon-shot or a blizzard; tied down to the ever-lurking danger, to the fate that is marked by the number of your platoon or the name of your trench, unable to take off your shirt when you want to, unable to write home when you will, and even the humblest needs of life subject to regulations outside your will—that is war. The Press correspondent who comes to the trenches to see how we are getting on does not know it; the general staff officer who comes to get a medal with us does not know it. When he is hungry or gets the wind-up or feels pleased at having finished his job he pulls out his watch and says: "It's late, I must be off." And if he has got lice, he has a bath when he gets home.

"Castelnuovo is burning too," said Porro.

And an even crackle of musketry very near us suddenly came up from the valley, punctuated by the more ominous detonations of the bombs.

<sup>1</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, Cant. xxiv. l. 115.

"When he arises and around him looks,  
Wholly bewildered by the mighty anguish."

(Longfellow.)

"They are attacking in the valley-bottom."

"No. It is the park at Pontarso burning."

But a rattle of musketry came down from the top of the abandoned mountain, and somebody said:

"It's the rearguard that's attacked."

"They'm here already, God — it. Not even time to sleep, they don't give us."

Nobody answers. The column crawls slowly onwards in the reddish darkness, in the heavy stickiness of mud and snow, up the steep track. The weariness of our long nights without sleep clings to our packs, sleep imprisons our limbs; four bites of biscuit in our stomach, and in our hearts the desolation of things that are being abandoned for ever. The short halts—bodies flung to the ground, and a few moments later some are already snoring—only tire us more. The empty stomach grumbles; but we must go slow with the iron rations, for there will be no Collet, alas, with rations at Malga Val Pra; but perhaps we shall find orders to go on still farther. Even swearing is heard no longer. One marches mechanically, without thinking; the hand of sleep caresses the limbs with terrible temptations, passes light fingers over the face and whispers infinitely sweet poltrooneries in the ear. What do the retreat, the burning houses, the danger of attack, matter? To find a little straw, a bit of fire, and sleep! To dream of home far-off, where the bed is so large and warm! And the night, torn by explosions, lit by the glare of burning villages, creeps coldly over the mountains towards a livid, threatening dawn.

The wood grows thinner. The rim of a little hill appears, and two shadows silhouetted against the sky. Sentries. Here we are.

"Who comes there?"

"Alpini."

"Give the password."

"God — and — your bloody soul, don't you hear, man, we're Alpini, Dio Madonna!"

The sentry is convinced by this flood of rustic blasphemy.



“Pass.”

Farther on we find the major, who is talking to another, a fat man wrapped in a cloak; it must be the colonel. A few cross orders. The men are to stay below, in a group; no use pitching tents; let them sleep. One company has already arrived; and there are two other battalions who retreated from another direction. And a tangle of transport, restive mules, swearing drivers, the sharp noise of shod hoofs on the stone. The night declines; lighter clouds unravel themselves over the valley towards the east.

“Come here, Monelli, if you want to sleep. There’s a blanket.”

Stretched out on the blanket, snuggling under a tent-fly on which the rain is gently beating, with clenched fists, we abandon ourselves at last to sleep.

Then a brutal awakening (even in one’s sleep one was marching in a nightmare), a drowsy resumption of close order, roll-call, departure. A little biscuit, half a tin of bully to eat. It is raining. From the sopping pines under which we are sulkily filing, drip cold and sadness. The sky has no color, marks no hour—a perpetual twilight steams up from the ground and is wafted down from the clouds. We are marching towards unknown mountain positions, without wire, without a sign of trenches, whence we are to hold up the oncoming enemy. As we climb upwards we meet again a heavy, windless snowfall, which spreads an even desolation over the ground and enwraps the heart in an unrelieved longing for light and warmth.

And this gray handful of men, lost on the immense, snowy hillside, in the twilight of the tempest, are thy defenders, Italy. Between the blandishments of thy spring and the greedy maw of the enemy there stand only these tattered men, O Italy, whose cherries are even now ripening in the sun and who art a little heedless, though the danger is knocking at thy door, and thy maidens are letting their fresh little breasts peep out and the unfit for service are buying straw hats. Bloom securely in peace, Italian maids, and go back safely to your beds late at night, ye





THE ALPINO'S COMRADE



"This gray handful of men . . . are thy defenders, Italy."  
(Men of the author's platoon on Little Cauriòl)

skrimshankers! Let the contractors who sent us these bombs that won't burst, and these boots that burst everywhere, grow fat without trembling. Here Zollet is defending you, old Zollet who limps along cursing with arthritis, but is jealous of his rifle, which will hit the mark tomorrow because he has saved his bully-beef fat for it: here Cecchet is protecting you, who worked twenty years in Bocheland and speaks German when he is laying mines, saying *fertig* and *Feuer*, as he learned in the mines of Schleswig, but is the stubbornest mule of the whole company, and persists in carrying with his section an old rattle-trap of a Perino machine-gun. And there's Smaniotto, who has already been wounded three times, and Cesco, the only son of an old woman that sells fruit on the highway at Primolano, who sends her five lire a month. Good fellows all, great talkers and gossips, but silent when the work is hard, marked by their rough life, with a sad, surprised seriousness, who have not even the hope of going off to instruct recruits like the lieutenant, and, if they don't get a wound, have nothing to look forward to but a fortnight a year in which to get tight without fear of a policeman. What have they had of this mother-country whose most solid bulwark they now are, which has been a stepmother to them and pushed them out to the mines of Westphalia and the roads of Galicia, and has called them back from time to time to hump their packs? But in them the idea of country coincides with an obscure but effective sense of duty. A categorical imperative. It is duty. They learned it in their early years of childhood among the rude mountains, where life is marked by certain definite barriers which cannot be crossed, by severity of seasons, by roughness of the elements, by difficulties which require repeated and unremitting heed to overcome them. And their only bodily joys to clasp the girl whom they must afterwards marry—duty—and wine that drowns care—that is why they get tight. And no other repose than to look at the smoke of their pipes curl up against the lines of the mountains or the azure distances of the plain. And for most of them, since the mountain has little to give, emigration abroad and hard, serious, grinding labor

among unknown folk whom they do not love, under unknown regulations into which they don't inquire; the tunnel of which they do not know the object, the road that leads to unknown lands which they will never tread, afterwards, when they have finished it, and hallowed it with a death or two. Life prolongs itself thus in their minds, to end in an old age which allows them to return for ever to their native village, where, through the smoke of their pipes, they can more tranquilly regard the azure distances that tempt no longer. Stamped in this austere mold, they have come to the war as to a new aspect of their hard life; they have found there the same iron duty; they have brought to it the same grave and serene courage. And a confused sense of communion with this soil they know how to dig, with these trees they know how to cut down, trim, and polish, with these rocks they know how to grip and carve, is what patriotism means for them.

And the bad language they utter to punctuate the march—the chaplain knows it well—is nothing but a magic means to bear fatigue, like the rhythmical panting at every stroke on the boring-bar, like their “aha, aha,” when they are pulling a six-inch gun. A good swearword frees the breech which has got bewitched, breaks the biscuit in two, helps to put on frozen boots, and jerks the cork out of the bottle of cognac which their friend the driver—he who comes from the warmth of the stable—has given them to keep out the cold. And if the lieutenant does not mark the heads of his speech with an oath, it loses all oratorical effect; just as it is useless to give a man ten days' prison unless it is emphasised with a good kick given with the whole sole of the foot—in the manner of Colonel Ragni.

Turin is of the same opinion, with shoulders as solid as an oak chest and a great round head on a short neck (a shell splinter broke his great head at Sant' Osvaldo, and thank goodness he had on a heavy Farina<sup>1</sup> helmet, or else he'd have gone to

<sup>1</sup> The Farina helmet was a heavy one, whereas the ordinary Italian helmet was light.



his Creator—and now he never wears anything but his Farina helmet).

“Don’t get drunk any more, Turin.”

“You ask me the impossible, sir.”

“At least, don’t let me see you drunk again.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“And if I see you drunk you’ll get prison.”

“What d’you want to put me in prison for? Give me a punch on the head, then—give that bloody fool of a Turin who gets found out a punch on the head!”

Bivouacked in the mud at midnight. But at three o’clock we had to start off again, otherwise some of us would have been frozen. We leave again for the saddle, in the rain, with the rumbling of the fight below. The dawn clear, the morning chilly, and then the sun upon the peaks we have reached again restores life. A pleasant nap among the rhododendrons. But there is no respite. Alarms once more. The enemy is pursuing. Gunfire, rifle-fire, rapid construction of shelters. Hunger. At night, alarms, blizzard, frost. Shall we never sleep again?

*Monte Cima, May 26th.*

And at dawn up come the two fine Hungarian battalions which come from rest in Serbia to the alluring conquest of Italy, freshly fitted out—fine young fellows, a vigorous reserve of the Emperor’s. They arrive in a fog, and we haven’t had time to wire; the first line is a veil. “Hurrah!” and they are inside the line. “So we’ve won!” This certitude of victory we found afterwards on the upturned faces of all the dead, torn by bombs, blown up, bayoneted: in that certainty they died. For behind, there was the Feltre battalion, which had been brought up the evening before from the valley—and the men thought they were going to rest: and when at a certain point they had made them do left wheel, directing them up that beastly path in the night and the rain, they had begun to curse and swear at the Service, and they had just arrived at that moment worn out and abso-

lutely done after a six hours' march. But at the Hungarians' cry of triumph, and Colonel Bozzano's cry of alarm, "Feltre battalion, by God, forward the Feltre battalion!" they had jumped up and vented their rage on those fellows. A few minutes' hand-to-hand fighting with bombs, with bayonets, and with rifle-butts. Colonel Bozzano fell among the first, many others fell at the first shock of conflict. But then the enemy were overthrown, and the servers of the Hungarian machine-guns killed at their guns; the victors gave up and surrendered; our machine-guns brought up like lightning and, placed on the flank, cut off those who are running away. Who will have got back, of those fine Hungarian battalions, to tell of the defeat?

Suddenly the sun flashed out; the farthest mountains, the blue and violet mountains of Feltre, washed by the rain, opened to view. Behind gleamed the rivers of the plain, the houses of the plain, flushed rosy in the morn. With such sweet charm fair Italy offered herself to her defenders, with such sweet mockery she laughed in the astonished faces of the prisoners.

The men dash into the wood to look for the dead, and take away their nice new boots.

The night comes down quickly with snow, a blizzard which pierces our dripping tunics and whips our faces with fine hail. We are swollen with moisture, and our stomachs, in which the tasteless half-tin of bully is dancing, are drooping with hunger. Beneath the empty tents, without fleabag, without blankets, we snuggle up to one another to rouse a bit of warmth out of our bodies. But at every moment an alarm, a croaking of machine-guns, obliges us to leap out, lie flat upon the snow, and scan the darkness with heavy eyes. Outside the storm is as hostile and terrible as a tangible enemy; cold undoes the heart-strings more than the danger; it seems as if the mountain was rising up to shake us off its back. And, even if the alarms stop, there is no rest beneath the flapping tent-flies: the congealed snow is lying in wait, and worms its way under our boots; sleep hammers



on the temples and the forehead with heavy fists. And if I close my eyes I dream that I am wrapped in a wet fleabag at the bottom of a cold sea.

The machine-gun calls us outside again. Again the night sucks me into its savage maw, presses out of my frozen veins the little blood left in them. No, I mean, one can't live much longer like this. The blizzard rushes at me with keen tentacles and shakes me, and I tremble desolately, and, if the rifle-fire is silent, it is only so that the storm may shriek more loudly over my surrender. So be it. Let the enemy come once for all, and take me and drag me where he will and kill me. Amen. Besides, who on earth will succeed in getting the men out of the tent once more? Country, family, duty . . . words, words that find no echo in my agony. There is a snowstorm that overwhelms everything, and there is here in the night a limp rag whose teeth are chattering, who has no thought and no will, who abandons himself to the tempest to be blown and beaten about like a rag.

Is that another alarm? A panting soldier yells something serious into my ear. I look at the man; I do not think of his words; I wonder how it is possible that this net of ice which is paralyzing me does not entangle him too. Enemy, below the brow, a sentry surprised. . . . Shadows file out from the tents towards the trench of snow: I don't know if I called them myself, but they are coming once more, brave lads. Zanella is coming too, with a bottle of wine. I don't ask by what miracle he has found a bottle of wine on the ravaged mountain-side—but I fasten myself to the bottle-neck, and, lo, the red sun lights up again in my body. I am a good soldier again; a kick propels a reluctant man into the hole and flatters my cowardice. The men, spread along the ditch of snow, yell out their torment of the damned through the rattle of musketry.

Colonel Ragni says that he will have the transport officer who fails to send us wine sent into the infantry. Water from the sky and water in the body: one feels the frogs in one's belly already. His great red laugh casts spurts of courage over all. And our

major pulls his grayish beard, and if the shells begin to claw the sky he goes for a stroll over this little hill that is bald and smooth as your hand. But Bosio has wine. And if one takes a note to him he says: "Have a drink—I've got plenty more." Then he makes his confidences. "They wanted to send me some wire, but I answered it was unnecessary, because one goes in better with the bayonet when there isn't any."

Such men breathe courage like this sturdy wind. One cannot imagine how they lived in the feeble time of peace; one imagines they must have emerged for this war to impersonate in themselves the tranquil determination of the battalion which must go to its death. One used to picture a hero as an ascetic made superhuman by disdain for life. But these men are made of the stuff of cheerful roysterers; and don't talk to the major of girls, for his eyes begin to glisten at once. No, they were not matured by reading severe books; no renunciatory purpose beats in their healthy hearts. But see, their battalion has for ten days been fighting and marching and fasting in snow and rain, has been sending stretchers down the hill; many good Alpini have turned up their toes; low grumbles are beginning to be heard against the commanders who are leaving us to die, against the Supply who starve us; and they keep calm, smiling faces, and even to look them in the eye is like a mouthful of brandy: and if the Austrians attack, they jump to the head of the battalion with an oath, no one stays behind, and the fight becomes a cheerful, rosy *festa*.

Rain without cease. And towards evening snow—listless, wet snow which is more wetting than a rainstorm. The sun, indeed, seems to be a distant myth; and the days are empty, humdrum, and stormy, under the empty tents, with empty stomach, on these bare slopes, which smoke with perpetual damp. Everything is rotting and soaked, only the dead, whom we have no time to bury, are still fresh and pure in our midst.

Food, at last! Then I slept all day like a lord, rolled in the fleabag that Zanella scrounged for me. God knows where.

What does it matter if the sun brings the bombardment? Anyhow, it's the sun, it's the sun! Evaporation of a fortnight's wet, the marvel of drying oneself in this warmth.

Yes; but now we should like a little fog, for the bombardment is very heavy from every part of the sky, and there is not the slightest shelter on this bare hill. Seeing that there is no escape, the men put a good face on a bad business, and stand in impudent groups all over the grass, as though they liked getting shot at. Not even the cries of the wounded shake them. Moro and I huddle under the tent, and think we are the cleverest: what a surprise when we see splinters and bullets coming in!

Orders to take a trip to Italy on duty. At breakneck speed down the battered path, towards Bieno under bombardment.

Bieno is a complete ruin. The black, twin-lighted windows in the burnt walls are safe; the fresco has gone. A reek of burning, a smell of dead things. But outside in the country spring awaits me. Warm, perfumed, disturbing. So there really was a spring in the world, and we didn't know it up there, plunged in perpetual winter! I roll madly on the grass, I drink in the green with my thirsty eyes, I walk in a dream, like a sleep-walker, along the white road.

"You come from Monte Cima?"

I answer "Yes" rather proudly. I imagine that the lieutenant admires me. Monte Cima, damn it, means the enemy checked, a key position preserved, the pleasant lunch that you have offered me, comrade, ensured by our standing firm up there. I look at

the lilies on the table; outside the windows orderlies are running about; a batman comes out with a shining pair of leggings; a sergeant in the house opposite parts his hair in front of a looking-glass. . . . I look at all this with an air of benevolent protection. And the lieutenant says to me: "Mind the general doesn't see you with that long hair, or he'll put you under arrest."

The captain also asks if I come from Monte Cima.

"And where are you going?"

"Where is your railway pass?"

I reply that I haven't got one, because there aren't any up there, and they told me I should get one at divisional headquarters. Then the captain explodes. "But these battalions that haven't got their stationery boxes with them, what do they think they're doing, good God?"

I should like to tell him, modestly, that we have done something. But he is so fed up with these adjutants who don't know their business, and the sergeant who comes in at a cross ring of the bell looks at me with such an obvious air of surprise when he hears that I haven't got a pass, that I really begin to think the wrong is on our side. And I say no more. If they only knew that I am the adjutant.

At Castelfranco Veneto the commissariat lieutenant says:

"When is this war going to end? It's about time the war ended. I simply can't stand this war any longer. Gosh, this war!"

The charming typist who is tapping away near him looks at me languidly, with black rings round her eyes. Good gracious, how black the rings are round those great, velvet eyes! The poor girl must be sick of the war too. Then another girl comes in bringing the register, and goes off swinging her hips, very prettily, with her shining nails and too much scent on her. Then another comes in—my word, how pretty the women of Castelfranco are! She is the head of the store, and the lieutenant hands me over to her with a weary gesture.

The store is just a busy mass of strong, strapping girls, who send the bags of boots whizzing and hoist rolls of blankets up

to the top story—brawling, yelling, roaring with laughter, with kindled cheeks, healthy teeth that gleam, the odor of youth, spring and green fields, trills of laughter which bring the lieutenant, poor soul, out of his office, to come and restore a little discipline into this romping girls' school. I understand, I understand—this war is too hard for him.

The lady in the train says to me: "But you who come from up there, do tell me, when is the war going to end?"

"We hardly know, my dear lady. When we are relieved and come down towards the hutments where we can take off our boots, the war is over, for us. And when the alarm comes and we have to go up again, then we think that war is really an eternal damnation, a Danaïd's sieve for those fine young men that they throw into it."

"But don't you make war willingly?"

"Oh, gracious! ma'am, that is too difficult a question. It would be as though I asked you if you went willingly to the dentist to have an aching tooth out. You go there with a painful courage, don't you? And so, with a painful courage, my lads prepare to leap out when they are told it's time to do so."

"I think the most terrible thing must be not being able to shave every day."

"You are right. It is terrible not to be able to feel oneself shaved and to have to eat one's food with dirty hands. But there are other things perhaps nastier: to drink the water of a pond into which dead men have been thrown, for example, or counting your toes to be sure that they are still all there, when you can take your boots off after a fortnight. And it is sad, too, to see one's dead comrade go away on a stretcher, and to see his letters from his mother arrive a few days later."

"Ah, thank heaven; my son has had no such foolish ideas. He followed my advice and is clerk in an advanced park—oh, dear, yes—but always in safety. He loves his mother, and doesn't wish to make her die of sorrow."

"A fine example of filial affection, ma'am. The Spartan women



gave their sons their shields and said: 'With it or on it.' But those youths who moved against the Persians in a phalanx with clenched teeth did not love their mothers, it seems. At most, they loved their country."

"Well, I don't care a hang about my country."

The speaker of these last words was not the old lady. The old lady sits silently looking out of the window at a rosy Bolognese sunset, a rosy sun which is sinking behind a row of poplars. Like a beaming general reviewing his rigid conscripts. Or perhaps, ma'am, like a bottle of red ink such as your son uses in the advanced park which has upset behind a rack of copying pencils.

The man who doesn't care a hang about his country is the mature gentleman in the corner. He has the worn leather dispatch-case of a lawyer or a usurer. He has boots yellower than *xabaione*, and a tie of the deepest, dusky blue. His face is round and gleams with city sweat. The gentleman corrects the sharpness of his words.

"Oh, Lord, of course, one's got to love one's country. But when it robs us of our most sacred affections, then . . ."

"Then" is the "I don't care a hang" all over again. One wonders where in that comfortable paunch the most sacred affections are lodged. Perhaps his most sacred affections are the sugar which is measured out to him these days, the nightly sittings in a café which a prefect's edict cuts too short, the bathing on a beach which is disturbed by enemy aeroplanes. Good God, my poor beetlecrushers are fighting for the quiet digestions of these citizens also, up there. (This morning from Bassano what an insistent drumming of bombardment up towards the heights, towards Castelvomberto and Monte Fior!) And for this natty little sergeant of the Red Cross, who, if he loved his country, would be a poor devil of an infantry sergeant, washed out and thin—and then he would not be here: he would be in the leave-train. And for the lounge-suited civilian in the middle, whose excesses and vices prepared that defective chest which got him exempted at the medical examination, yet who smooths his long



hair carefully over his ears and is reading about the war in Guido da Verona's interpretation ("Today the pretty machine-guns sing," etc.).

To love one's country. The words sound ill, now, to my ear. There is a kind of musty smell about them, as when one opens up in the boxroom the box of papers one's grandfather thought so much of. One perceives that they are words which should not be repeated too often, lest they may lose their meaning, and become a mere conjunction of syllables without a soul.

The train leaves us all—the prudent mother, the practical gentleman, the natty sergeant, and the washed-out youth—in the darkling city, in the tumultuous, noisy city which catches hold of one with new temptations, which smells of vice and poltroonery, which holds a yawning bed open for the body, sucks all power of resistance out of the heart, and drives distant visions out of mind. What's the name of that little bitch in the corner of the café who tempts me with her blackened eyes? I saw her once before, and I liked her once before, I believe.

When I came into the café with my heavy boots and—I suppose—with rather a smell clinging to my uniform, three or four elegant young nuts looked at me deprecatingly. (Look, there are two others who were discharged for adiposity, and now they are making it rounder still as they gain millions by army contracts.) It struck me that my tattered appearance was really unsuitable in the elegant room, and I sought, timidly, the corner where the little bitch who seemed to know me was sitting.

"You come from the war?" she says to me. "Poor fellow!"

"What is your name?"

Then the painted creature very gravely dipped her straw into her glass of iced grenadine. A rosy glitter of ice in the glass, and a round, red spot on her still redder lips—a symphony in red which started my thoughts off on nostalgic tracks—like that blood-red sunset seen from the train. And then it seemed to me the carmine lips unlocked themselves over the snow of her teeth to say these words to me:

"Don't you know me? Don't you remember when you were a student you met me at fancy-dress dances, at poker-tables, in private supper-rooms? I wove a dark net round your heart, and you hadn't then so many silly ideas in your head. You, too, thought that 'country' was a rhetorical phrase, and your hungry eyes skimmed over my smooth breasts more easily than you now skim on skis over the hostile mountain. What have you come down here for, mistaken man? To converse with the highbrow who conceals his cowardice under professions of humanity, with the learned who are deaf and blind to the suffering of the world, and content with an annotation elaborated in the margin of a book in a snugly closed sitting-room? To beg some cheap caress to satisfy your hunger? When, in the night of battle, they told you that the front was broken, that the enemy was pressing on, that the Croats were making for the valleys of Italy from the captured passes, something broke in your heart, you had a lump in your throat, and your heart swelled with the sacrifice and the holocaust—didn't it? Romanticist! Won't you have a Strega?"

"Bring a Strega."

And the waiter brings a Strega in a coffee-cup. For today is Sunday, and it is forbidden to sell alcoholic drinks. By a similar quibble there is a lawyer down there who, knowing that the revision of his class was near, enrolled as a volunteer. Yes. In the commissariat. Let us hope that they make a medal ribbon for the volunteers, and it will be a pretty trophy on his chest, where there would be so much room for the purple of a wound.

Is it still my little friend of university days speaking, or is the heavy air of the café again winding the thread of meditation up from the skein of my heart?

"You see, love of country is one of those categories which has to be admitted until the day in which it goes contrary to your interests. And you still have some, or act as though you had, because you are not a practical man. 'War is coming,' said that friend of yours in a burst of patriotism: 'One must enlist.' But

he didn't enlist, because, if the war had not come, he would have lost a month—a month of his life, you understand—in serving his country. When the war came and he enlisted as a volunteer—of course, they would have taken him just the same—he found himself one day at a drawing of lots for the front. Before the draw they asked him if he would choose to go at once, and he said: 'What a silly idea! One must be practical.' When you are up there, you read long speeches in the newspapers, don't you? You read of patriotic demonstrations, of banquets to mark the soldier's return, and such like ceremonies. Well, you see, those people, if they meet when the lights are low, wink at one another like the Roman augurs. But this is a gloomy talk. Won't you come with me tonight into the alcove with the violet light? For I am your little friend of idle times, and my name is the name of all the docile little ladies who flattered the indolence of your student days."

No, clearly the creature who decorated the corner in the café with her vicious grace never thought of saying all this to me. There is only—and that there certainly is—the invitation to the violet-lit alcove in her eyes which shot a warm, heavy, enervating glance at me: summer rain on the drought of my desire. But, instead, I got up and went to a cinema. In the cinema they were showing the battle for the capture of Ala. There was something comic about it, a notion of 1848, troops at the "*Savoia!*" in fours on the highroad, Bersaglieri plumes, trumpets sounding the attack, prancing officers, Austrians in flight in close order. I expressed my protests and surprise with some exuberance. My neighbor gave me a nasty look, and said:

"Excuse me, if you don't like it, go away."

"But, my dear sir, don't you see how silly it is? I am at the war, and I tell you the war isn't like that."

"What does that matter to me? Who asked you to come and tell me about the war that you're in! Let me enjoy it reproduced as I imagine it myself."

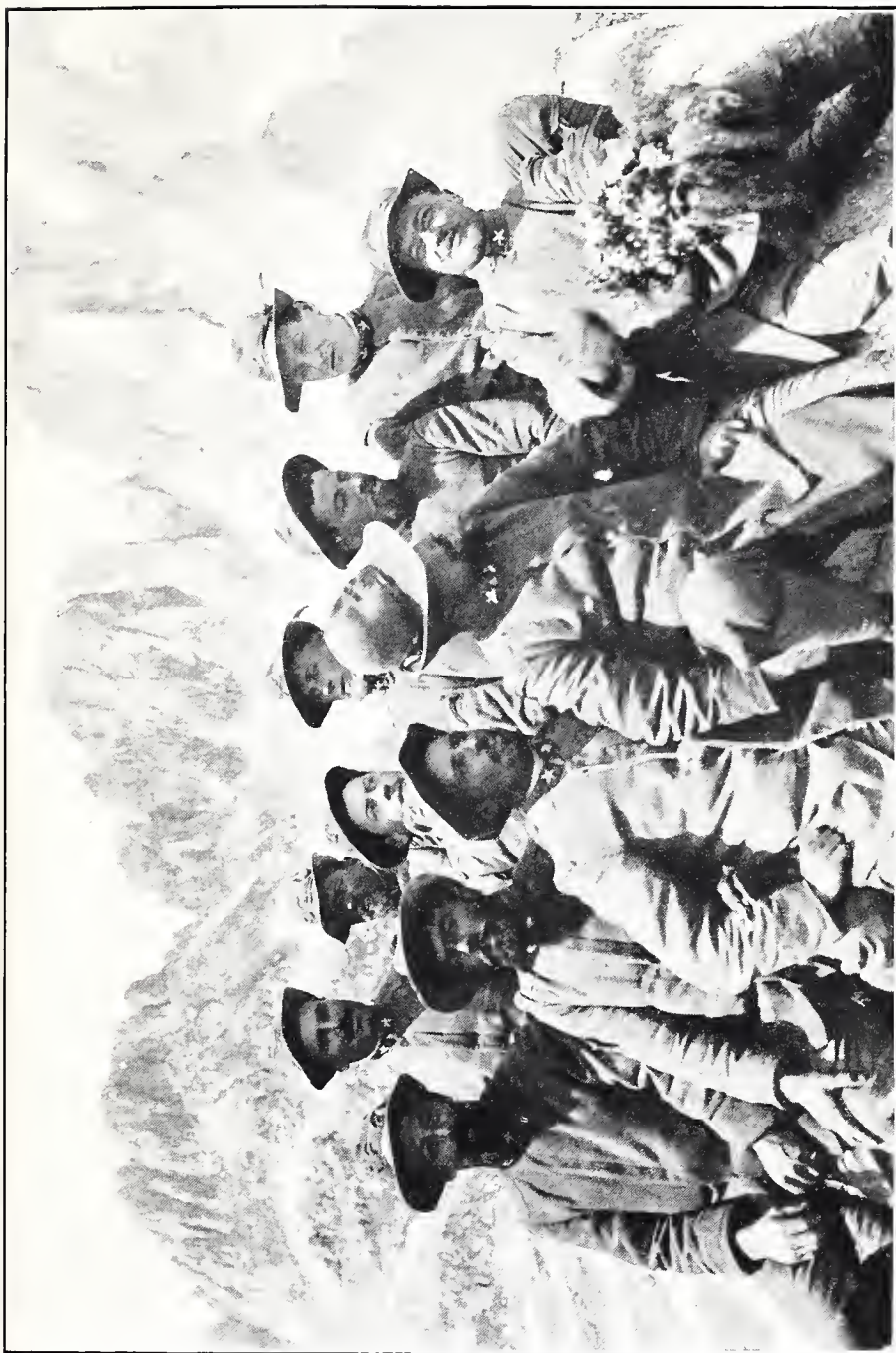


## PART II

But it is already time for us to go, I to die, and you to live: which of us is going to the better thing is concealed from all but God.—PLATO, *Apology*.

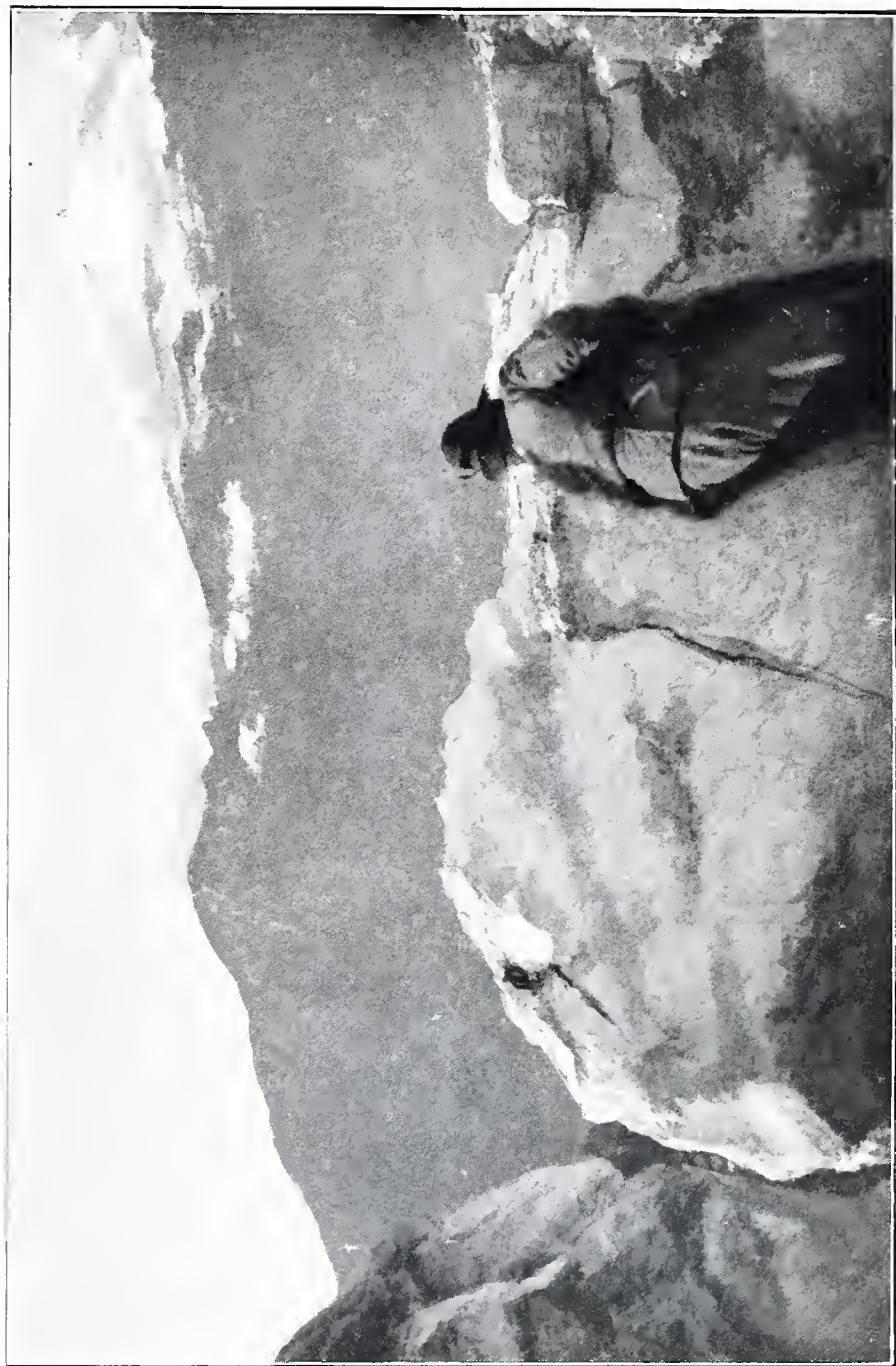






THE AUTHOR'S PLATOON ON CIMA D'ASTA, 1916

(Colognese in center of back row, Facchin on extreme left, Rizzardo third from left, and Durigàn extreme right of front row)



“The sentry, carelessly leaning against the low stone wall.”

IN the warm afternoon the torrents of melted snow are flowing, the mountain puts off its motley of snow, and is drying its bright and rugged skin in the sun; and the sharp lines of the peaks pierce deep into the sky.

Still chewing the bitter rhododendron root while sitting at the door of my tent and passing in review the solemnities of the mountain-tops from Adamello to Cima Mandriolo. The sentry, carelessly leaning against the low stone wall, harmonizes so perfectly with the brown of the rocks that he seems a necessary part of them. The soul of the mountain flows into him from that rude, primitive contact: in him the war is a new law of rocks, snow, and sky of which he knows not whence it comes, but he bears it with serenity, as he bears the blizzard and the snowstorm. And with lazy eyes under half-closed lids—though he sees far and sure—he looks at the jagged line of peaks in front which we shall have to capture one day, and at the snow on which we shall leave our blood and the marks of the combat. Tomorrow: but it is the same tomorrow (what matter whether remote or near at hand?) which will bring winter and old age and inevitable death. What is the use of grouching about it? Today the sun is kind and honest: let us throw open everything we have—tents, hearts and fancies—to the kindly warmth that gently drugs us and stills our ugly thoughts.

Warmth and drowsiness among the stones. Faint rumbles of mines, infrequent explosions of artillery, are like storm voices which do not touch your disdainful soul, my mountain. The shell defiles your snow and stifles itself therein; men scratch your skin to get shelter for themselves, they carve your flanks with mines, they outrage you with their filth; the trench ulcerates your pure crest; and you, unheeding, drink in the wind and the



heavens and do not care. When the little men have finished their game, you will make the tunnels in which their fear found a hiding-place fall in with a rhythm that only seems slow to us creatures of a day; you will smooth out your flank now gashed by the road; you cover the rubbish with pure snow; the dead you hide in the secret vaults of an icy tomb. You are waiting for another event of which we cannot know the nature; you continue the eternal combat that consumes you with a rhythm which to us creatures of a day seems to have no existence.

And underneath the snow that is melting appear numberless little lakes, some still with a bloom of ice on them and still chilly at the feet of the black walls, without a ripple. Headquarters have their lake, little coquetries are going up round the huts, a tent or two, and the pile of stones which the 5th mountain battery has made with a fine imprudence in full view of the enemy positions of Cauriòl and Busa Alta. And Carteri, with his sappers, has built a boat, and goes out in it with Bonsembiante, who rows with a mattock. The 265th has its seven or eight little lakes: the cooks have one, the shoemakers another, and one dark, solitary one is up by Cima d'Asta and a small sentry-post enjoys it. Others are tragic custodians of dead bodies. The two lieutenants who were killed in last week's fight at Col San Giovanni were thrown by the Austrians into the pond which is below the pass of Cinque Croci. We didn't know it, and drank the water. Probably Garbari wasn't aware of having his lake, also, since it was still under the snow. He was aware of it all right the day when, walking peacefully along with his hands in his pockets and his pipe in his mouth, he felt the snow give way and disappeared before the astonished eyes of a sentry-post. He was pulled out singing:

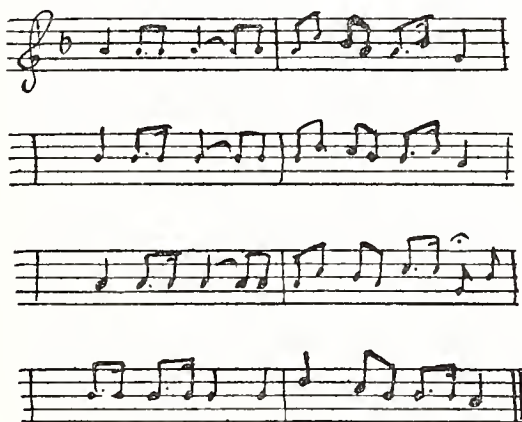
*"In mezzo al mar  
c'è là un camin che fumano  
saranno la miei bella  
che si sconsumano."*

(Far out to sea  
I see a smoking chimbely,  
Far out to sea  
I see a smoking chimbely,  
And, oh, it seems to me  
They're cooking of my Emily.)

To appreciate this ditty you need a corner of a hut one evening when we've been tramping in the snow all day, and there's a row of full wine-bottles on the table and a good many empty ones on the ground. You repeat the first two lines three times, and let the whole chorus go wild on the last two.

"And the tune?"

"This is the tune."



He was singing with joy at having a lake of his own. Now gentians are flowering on the stony banks, and a little raft cuts the brown, sluggish waters.

But nobody has got the prettiest lake of all, because it is in the second line: and it has so romantic a name that on saying over and over again its name, *Il Lago di Costa Brunella*—a verse of nine feet—one begins dreaming impossible dreams and thinking of one's girl.

The fortnight's balance-sheet: a merry bayonet engagement with the young troops of the Pavione battalion over Hill 2,034, in the tangle of rhododendrons and pines; but before that an unhappy show, that ended badly, with the veterans of the Val Brenta on these hummocks in front, just to increase the number of dead in the cemetery of Malga Sorgazza; and a few patrols in force; little disconnected actions, and God knows why they make us have them—perhaps in order to give good white bread to these prisoners that we bring in without much trouble; long-nailed Bosnians, Dalmatians, and Transylvanians. And when the gigantic Bellegante, who signed himself "Volunteer from Roumania" in the *Gazzettino* under the heading "Greetings from the Front," was able to have a chat in the Roumanian tongue with the Roumanian prisoner who was no taller than a pennorth of cheese, you should have seen how pleased they both looked. They talked nineteen to the dozen; they found common acquaintances and places they both knew, and were both happy to become again for a moment two civilians, with their own private affairs into which nobody has a right to pry.

Whoever comes in time of peace to see the Prima Lunetta will think it impossible that it could have been taken by assault and held, without even a single round of artillery-fire—this crest which rises up stark against the sky on one side and falls almost precipitously down on the other. Today, one day after the combat, it already seems a fabulous undertaking.

"You should have seen those blighters," laughs Colonel Ragni, "climbing up like cats. Didn't they, Scandolara? We hadn't the courage to hope as much. And in half an hour those ruffians had cleared the whole bag of tricks."

Blighters and ruffians they are, in the eulogistic language of Colonel Ragni, those tough *alpinàs* of the Monrosa battalion.

Lieutenant-Colonel Rambaldi is leaving the battalion on promotion, to go and command a regiment of infantry. This morn-



ing at dawn, when, with his haversack slung, his cloak rolled up on his back, and his hat more squashed in than usual, he started down to the plain on foot, he found all Busa's company assembled at the turning, and they presented arms to him, jumping to it with a smartness of heartfelt affection. It was a trying surprise for the colonel: all the regret for sixteen desperate months with his fine little battalion was stamped on his beaten face, and made his voice tremble a little when he said a few gruff words to them. Then he broke off short, and, without even a motion of his hand, set off almost at a run down the mule-track.

When one comes in at night, and the voices of the men singing come from above, and the mist is sweeping into the cozy hollows of the rock walls, and the little lake is steaming (the clouds are cutting capers above it), and the huts look as inviting as rosy drawing-rooms where a sweetheart is pouring out tea into pink cups, but, instead, your batman is there delousing your fleabag—NOSTALGIA. The mule that carries the planks and the ammunition, the dripping water-skins and the concertina-wire that gets caught in the hanging branches of the firs, does not suffer from nostalgia, and is not waiting for leave.

(That is not true. Beppa, who is blind in one eye and would have been discharged if she had been a soldier, is thinking: "In June the grass was thick and tender and light green, and studded with lilies with stalks sweeter than water from a fountain. And there were pastures in which it was intoxicating to gallop. And I hadn't got to climb the hills with these long planks that knock my muzzle and my ears.")

Everything is padded with mist. The battalion marches silently into battle. Serious, stupid faces. Decision marked at the sides of the tight-shut mouths. Our nostalgia becomes an anxiety to get on. We will not let our hearts get slack looking at a promised

land from between the columns of sleep (how sweet the plain between the cypress-columns!). No cypresses up here; only dwarf junipers. And two dwarf junipers sweep over the fresh grave of Corporal-Major Facchin, struck by lightning with three more of the advanced post.

Clouds hang over us; clouds breathe our breath; we are exiled from the sun. But the captain who points with his finger, the wounded man on the stretcher, the puppet-like row of hand-grenades, the paunches of the filled sand-bags, the mule that walks calmly under shell-fire—these are the things that make up our life. Separated from the world of other people by a more solid barrier than that of death, which separates our songs from the melancholy colloquies of the departed.

And the tapping of a typewriter is humorous in the pauses of the machine-guns.

The war of fighting is beginning again for us.

And the burden of vain things is left behind us. Of what avail is it to ask if we shall dash forward by the road to Trent, or whether the people down below have need of a diversion or of something to put into the *communiqués*? Today we are no longer the same as yesterday, curious spectators of the bombardment and calmly performing the usual sentry duties. Today the bombardment let loose upon us has a logical connection with a regular series of events; the wheel has begun to go round, has already caught us and is dragging us in.

And the huts we are leaving are already dead things for us. We have detached from them our souls, which had been for a while lazily attached to that ease, to that red blanket, to that mossy corner of rock (dead ground). And the wine arrived too regularly, and the cook was getting too refined in the certainty that the mule would come every morning with the provisions. But destiny, with a kick, is punting us again into the *mêlée*. All around is new, cold, hostile.

Above the low clouds that surge and pile on one another, a sinister pale sun upon the high gray peaks against a gray

sky; crepuscular sadness which knocks at the heart's door, wide open to receive it, with presentiments, regrets, and fears. It is the hour when he who will die tomorrow is writing the prophetic letter to his family.

But the bombardment upon us is nothing in comparison with that which is furiously pounding captured Cauriòl and shrouding it in fearful clouds of smoke. One thinks with sorrow of our brother Alpini who are standing fast up there.

They are standing fast. If not, for what did Carteri die, who was the first to set foot on the top? But the Kaiserjäger, when they saw the small, funny figure of his orderly, who was following him, simply rolled him down the slope with a shove, right back to the wire. He picked himself up, shook himself, and shrieked his rage and encouragement to the rest of the platoon who leapt after him up to the top. And now there is no more talk of abandoning that top, and we ought to rechristen it with the name of the lieutenant who sanctified it with his sacrifice.

Little Garbarino told us this, Garbarino with the round, merry face, with bright eyes behind his spectacles, the brother of Garbarino da Pergine in our battalion who is bearded and as cross as a mother-in-law. Garbarino had the *minenwerfer*. A magnificent weapon. Trench-mortars? Let them go and hide their heads. Just think: the maximum range of a trench-torpedo is a hundred yards, its radius of action two hundred. It is portentous. With this fire-belcher he shared in the first two days of the fight, voluntarily, because he belongs to another battalion which does not come into it. He is now here with us again, still drunk with battle. But it is all you can do to get a word out of him.

"Garbarino, did you do good work with the torpedoes?"

"Mm. Killed a lot, I did."

And he smiles at an inward vision which he will not reveal to us.

"Garbarino, what was it like when they began to bombard?"

"Mm. Bad."

He says no more, and still smiles at his memory of those tragic hours. For if he said it was bad, it must have been hell up there.

Under the heavy rain, in night as dark as an underground vault, along giddy footpaths (we feel the rocks as we go, but a mule has tumbled down the mountain and dashed itself to pieces below); then in the lightening dawn the sight of a veil of snow upon the highest peaks, through tender, trembling woods, amid the splash of the torrents; up over a beastly steep hill towards the truculent Cauriòl, the new field of battle, to relieve the territorials of Val Brenta, who got the wind-up badly there yesterday, but, God damn it, they held Cauriòl. We arrive at night in the rain. Towards dawn I lean in utter weariness against the knees of an Alpino whom I find at hand, and go to sleep. In a little while I wake up, stiff, and violently shake the motionless, stretched-out body of the man. "Wake up, lazybones." Lazybones will never wake up again. It was a dead man I slept on.

Zanella feels the need to introduce a little elegance into my infamous hole of crumbling rock and earth, haunt of spiders and centipedes. He arranges my red blanket on the fleabag, leans a little looking-glass against the rock, and in the far corner he puts the box of English biscuits sent me by the staff-lieutenant. Home.

Bombardment. Now we are enshrouded in the smoke-clouds of the shell-bursts, and those who see it from below will think of us with an aching heart. The shells strike the rock, split the stones, and multiply the flying splinters. Cauriòl, gentle name of an agile jumper! <sup>1</sup> Just so. Lying flat on the ground, in terror because we cannot dig into it in our frantic desire to make ourselves adequate shelter, exposed to water, snow, and shell, bodies

<sup>1</sup> Cauriòl = *capriòlo*.

stretched out on the crest, whipped by the wind and hammered by machine-guns. No rhythm of light marks the day's passage: an even twilight from dawn till eve; it has no caesura but the resumption of the bombardment. Preceded by a gusty whine—one's whole soul bent on not thinking about it, so as not to go through the agony of waiting for it—the 13-inch shell comes over and bursts. The whole summit trembles, shakes, and rears up. They're too big, these projectiles, for this thin blade of ice and rock, which looked so romantic this morning from below, in its veil of snow!

At night the fatigue-party comes up, bringing bully beef, biscuits, and concertina-wire: we begin to scratch the rock with our picks, to pierce it with boring-bars, to disembowel it with mines; we have got to get inside, into the quick of the battered mountain, so as to get rest some day or other, to have peace some time or other, to sleep tranquilly for a little. And then the machine-guns begin their hurried sewing in the darkness, tirelessly stitching up with the threads of death the shell-torn hem of night.

### *September 8th.*

The enemy's fierce attack on the old Alpino battalion fared ill. Dead upon dead caught up among the concertina-wire, beneath the shallow, ravaged trenches, in the bottom of the clefts, in the drizzly murk.

Captain Busa, on return from leave, had reported to battalion headquarters just at the moment when the Austrians made their attack, and the shouts of "Hurrah, hurrah!" sounding sinister in the darkness, were coming down from the mountain-top.

"Go up there at once," said the major.

Off goes Busa at a wolf's trot up the track, a half-hour's climb, with his tongue hanging out and his head buzzing with the din of the battle: and he arrives panting, jumping sideways off the track at the exposed places, right in rear of Marni's section, which is firing its last clips at the now shaken enemy. Busa hastily in-



quires the situation, and the excellent Marni, speaking Italian out of respect for his superior, says:

"I think we played them a good tune, sir."

Then Busa remembers that Marni had given him the commission to buy some guitar strings in Italy. He gropes in the pockets of his tunic, brings out a packet, puts it into Marni's hands, and says in dialect: "Good. Now you play, and so we'll give them two tunes."

To command a platoon on the summit means getting killed like the brave Morandi, or at least getting wounded. Every day somebody has gone. Now there's Sergeant-Major Silvestri, who had better luck. Tonight, during the attack, he put up a good defense with his veterans. They threw all the hand-grenades they had at the enemy massed below, and followed them with stones and rocks. But the enemy kept pressing on, and there was nothing left to throw, when suddenly the sergeant-major hurled down the two cooking-pots and the bag of bread, accompanying them with a flood of oaths fit to split the mountain.

They're a nice lot at divisional headquarters. The other day, when we had just got to the top, and there was a regular beano of shells, shrapnel, musketry, mud, snow, and shouting, no sooner had we rigged up the telephone than a message comes saying: "Please weigh ten loaves and communicate the weight." What would have happened if the major had answered, "Send scales"? He would have been put under arrest. Being a philosopher, he drank on it.

One by one the old Alpini of my platoon are going. Today red-haired Monegat was killed—1893 class, a reckless scout, a fine soldier, a dear, affectionate fellow. One day, when we came in from an arduous patrol and I stood the whole platoon a glass of wine, he came to thank me solemnly, and loved me ever afterwards for that wine, the good, faithful old dog. Another

time, when we had to go and see if there were any snipers at Marter station, we halted a hundred paces outside the village and he was ordered to scout ahead to see. He only said: "If I'm wounded, don't go and leave me out there. Come and get me."

Then he went.

We found a postcard to his family on him. It said: "We are on a mountain so high that if you put up your arm you touch the sky." Lower down he wrote: "I must tell you that we are all over chats, and a tidy few of them, and they're big white ones with crosses on their backs."

Fragility of the snow-scenery. The water drips in the damp dens, the mud gets into your bones, and the frost makes the nights awful. But when fine weather comes back this high air is intoxicating. In the evening the Dolomites are clearly cut into light and shade—violet rocks, red snow. The sea of mist undulates like a luxuriant mane. Catinaccio towers harmoniously aloft, with its clefts and ramparts, gently smoothed by the fingers of night, which rises from the valley. Later, before the moon rises, an air of hostile portent broods over the snows, which seem a thousand years old, opaque, with shadows of steel. The mountain becomes an enemy again. She detaches the warm embrace that soothed our hearts; she closes herself in a chilly spite. We are intruders upon her nocturnal nakedness; there is horror in the necklaces of ice which are her only adornments.

The moon calls the muster of the other mountains—they re-emerge from the darkness and gaze threateningly. Peaceful lights are lit at Predazzo and Cavalese (at this hour one can pop out one's head to have a look). But when one goes out to put up concertina-wire, suddenly the enemy machine-guns begin croaking out their raillery against the purity of the night.

Always that cemetery smell under one's nose. There are twenty of them huddled in a crevasse, slowly decomposing. But to go

and pull them out at night is a serious affair. One can see the face of the medical ensign very slowly changing every day as it decomposes: yesterday his nose split open, and a green ooze is trickling out of it. But his eyes still look living and are wide open—no, it wasn't I who killed you!

It wasn't I who killed you; and then why, if you are a doctor, go and put yourself in the ranks in a night-attack? You had a tender fiancée, who wrote you lying letters, perhaps, but so comforting, and you kept them in your wallet. Rech took that wallet the night they killed you. We saw her portrait (pretty—though some people made rude remarks about it), and the photograph of your *castello*, and all the dear trifles you kept in it—a little heap of things, with us all round it, closely packed in the dugout, happy to have repulsed the attack, with a bottle of wine as a reward for our hard work. You had been dead such a little time, and were already nothing—a gray mass huddled against the rock and doomed to smell; and we were so alive, ensign, and so fiercely alive, that I sought in vain for a shudder of regret at the bottom of our curiosity. What good is it to you to have looked at the world with greedy eyes, to have held her young body in your arms, to have gone to the war as on a mission? And perhaps you too felt intoxicated by the air of these heights, and your post with the advance guard, and your destiny of sacrifice. For whom, dead man? The living in their haste, the living accustomed to war as to a quicker rhythm of life, the living who do not believe they have got to die, think about you no more. As though your death had not only closed your life, but had annulled it. You remain for a little as a number on the quartermaster's returns, a pathetic subject for the speech that commemorates you: but you, man, are as if you had never been. There is some carbon and sulphohydric acid below us, covered by a heap of rag-uniforms; and that we call dead men.

But you smell too strong tonight, dead.

So Captain Busa called four ruffians, who neither fear God nor the major, and said: "Boys, I'll give you each a glass of brandy and a gas-mask: go and take away those dead."

"Give us the brandy now, captain."

Later, Captain Busa says: "The b—s would have buried the living too if I hadn't held them back."

When the sun disappears behind the Cupola, and the Cimon della Pala suddenly begins to glow as though it were a piece of red-hot iron, we take our numbed feet out of our boots and rub them lengthily, gently, voluptuously, with grease, to squeeze out the danger of frost-bite.

The gentle softness of the highest Dolomites when freshly covered with snow muffles the sounds of alarm. The groups of shrapnel, white and red, dissolve in flakes against the sky. The summit smokes with every new shell that falls; a stray shell-base whizzes for an infinite time through the air, and then plays curious tricks, such as going to give Degan a kick on the back-side as he stoops over the bread-sack down at battalion headquarters. Degan, shot forward four yards, gets up rubbing the injured part and looking round suspiciously to see who could have played that trick on him. His comrades roar with laughter. Common aspects of our life. Never has it seemed to us so thoughtlessly gay as now, when it mocks us from the thin white edges of the reddish hills whence the sniper shells out his cartridge-clips like mad.

But if there pass over the evening sky those swollen clouds which end their journey down there where we could go to sleep secure from alarms, then all of a sudden we feel a confused desire for other skies and other causes for laughter.

Today, September 24th, the weather has that pleasant opacity of the November sea I saw from the rocks at Gallina one day in my calm and silly youth. I carry in my heart the empty feeling of that first slide down a giddy steep on skis. I fumble in my goatee beard with a motion that is becoming a tic, and which I saw an acquaintance make in far-off days. The smell of the feet my comrade is greasing mixes with the smell of corpses from our yesterday's booty: the smell of fallen leaves one day long ago

in the drizzly garden of a school, while the dreary mistress was dictating a very difficult sum in arithmetic. And if a dead man passes by on a stretcher, I live again a winter's evening when I followed as in a dream the dearest of my lost ones. Things far away. I live in things far away. Yet, also, strained towards a marvelous future, of victory, of nights hot with slaughter, of first-class carriages starting from the mist of the plain for the cities of God.

Colognese arrived this morning in a cotton tunic, pale and emaciated, and reported to the battalion headquarters.

"They might have kept you a little longer down at the dépôt, to rest," the major grumbled. "Are you all right again?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is your discharge from hospital? And why did they send you up into the snow in a cotton tunic?"

"There ain't no discharge: I just came up. I ran away from Feltre. I couldn't stand being there no longer. I ran away without saying nothing to nobody."

"Now you're in a nice mess. They'll have posted you as a deserter down there."

To Colognese, who, after a fortnight in hospital and five days at the dépôt, has come back to this mountain of agony and toil, these bureaucratic refinements seem funny. And while he goes once more up the road to the saddle where his third platoon is, the major sends a telegram to the dépôt explaining how Corporal-Major Colognese has come back of his own initiative, with laudable military spirit.

Answer: the dépôt waits to be informed what punishment has been inflicted on Corporal-Major Colognese.

With their usual idiocy, the fellows at the division have sent up luminous sights to be put on the rifles for firing at night, and ask us to report on their utility.

"Write," the major dictates to the clerk, "luminous sights are excellent. Now it only remains to make the enemy luminous."



October.

A week in hospital, three days of short leave, and now in the old wood, in the tawny blaze of the pines—avenues fit for *fêtes galantes*, the rustle of dead leaves under one's feet—I come back with the sluggishness of the town to the pure heights where my battalion is still in the thick of it.

It seemed to us impossible, the first week, to stay up here more than seven days more. We have been here, however, a month and a half. Stretchers going down, biscuit and bully beef and mine tackle coming up—it is almost a state of equilibrium. They said to the battalion: "It isn't a bit of good talking of relief. So now carry on."

We carried on. In the pauses of the bombardment—I heard a good story at the hospital. Mount Cauriòl is called "the bank," because it wins from everybody. Yes. When our artillery fires from Caorìa on their positions, the Austrians, not knowing whom to pay back, pay back Cauriòl, which is already singled out. To be any more singled out would be death. And every day Da Rui increases his spoil of 6-inch shell-cases and 13-inch driving-bands (the men call him the old Granfer of Predazzo), which he sells for five lire to the captains of the divisional headquarters who get as far as battalion headquarters—in the pauses of the bombardment, as I said, the excellent Alpini become again the miners, the masons, the carpenters they were in peace-time. Burrows are already winding inside the mountain: each platoon makes its own. Huts arise, hanging cages clinging to the rock—giddy platforms from which to spy out the coming of the fatigue-party. And who says we can do without the Engineers? If there wasn't the Field Company quartered at the edge of the wood, where should we steal our tools from?

Thanks to the feverish work, the losses are now smaller. At the bottom of the valley, at the high command, they examine the daily states, and think that we are still good for an engagement. Tomorrow, therefore, we shall attack that giddy promontory of rock which is called Little Cauriòl. The veterans shake their heads, and say: "We can't do it." But a dapper little captain of

divisional headquarters came half way up, had a glance at the rock tower, grim amid its snow, and said: "It can be taken."

So get down to it, beetlecrushers! It can be taken. He says so.

This evening we stood with our noses in the air in the hope of seeing the first wisps of snow gleam out. Then the action will be postponed, and perhaps they'll send us to rest. Clouds wrap the summit, tossed by a gale that blows right through one; they detach themselves, leaving tatters sticking to the rock walls, and the remainder fling themselves on other peaks—on Busa Alta, on Cardinal—and hide the little huts that nestle against their rocks. It was from that side that the Alpini of Monte Rosa went up. Did you ever think that a systematic, not a surprise, attack was possible over these crags on foot? It was possible. And now the ration-party goes up clinging to the cable.

Yes, but for the moment it isn't snowing. It will snow; that is certain. On the Pavione chain, and down to the east, a gray mass of clouds is gathering: the sunset in vain launches a few golden darts against them; they receive them with a cold, violet opacity. Tomorrow, perhaps . . .

Meanwhile the wine has come which the major is having served out to the platoon of scouts who are to make the first bound. A liter a head. Red Costa—who is always shirtless, and it is very difficult to make him wear a tunic, at least when he is resting—comes and says: "Will ye give us the halft now, sir, and t'other halft they'll drink after the action." A pause, and then: "So there'll be fewer to drink, and there'll be more for them that can drink."

*October 19th.*

Since this morning the heavy guns and Moro's little barkers of the 5th mountain battery have been bombarding the rock. This they call artillery preparation down below. I am certain the Boches, in their solid caves, are smoking their pipes and playing cards while they wait for us.

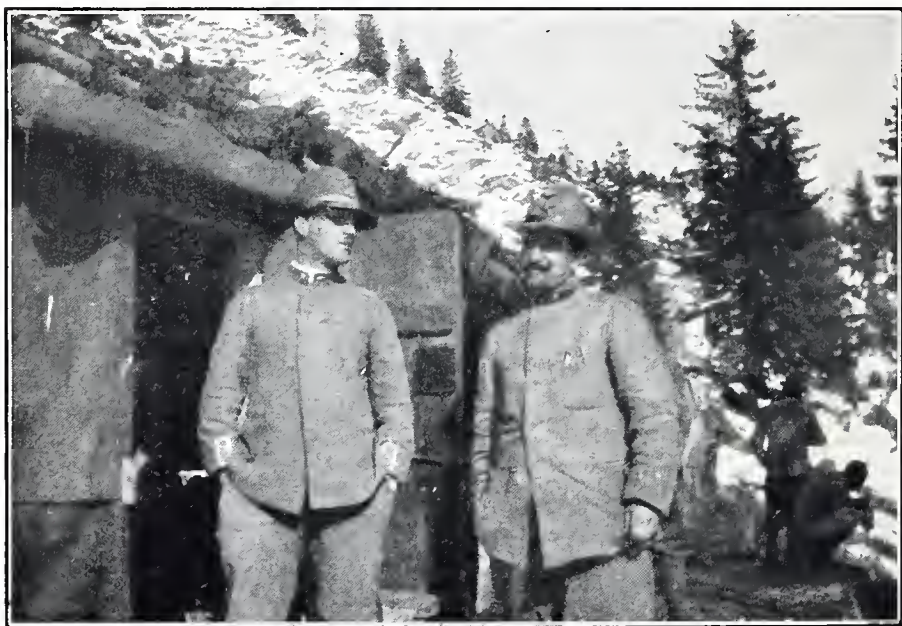


COLOGNESE





"The fatigue parties with the bully beef toil painfully up  
in the fresh snow."



MAJOR PISONI AND THE MEDICAL LIEUTENANT

A thick, gray, low sky. Mist rises from the bottom and isolates the two peaks—ours and the one we are to attack. If we die, we shall do so cut off from the world, with the impression that nobody will be interested. With the resigned notion of sacrificing oneself one would at least be glad to associate that of a body of spectators. To die in the sun, with clear distances, before the whole open scene of the world—that's how one understands dying for one's country: but, like this, one resembles a condemned man strangled in a dungeon.

We look at Bontadini, who is to be the first to go out, with veneration; but we, who will only follow him if he gets on, feel thorough skrimshankers. Manfroi brings wine, of course. The ancients said: "Pour libations to the infernal gods." Somebody says: "Tomorrow . . ." and we suddenly look at him with a mute reproach in our eyes, as though he had made an unpardonable *faux pas*. When those monks in the legend reached the border where sky and earth meet, they found a huge door, shut. Kneeling on the threshold, Brother Macario waited a hundred years for the door to open. Our tomorrow is on the other side of that door.

We couldn't take it, that damned hill. All the platoon of scouts—almost all the 265th—were left lying among those boulders, in the livid twilight, against the hostile barrier of rock which suddenly became alive with machine-guns lurking in their nests, which our artillery had been unable to touch. The major's eyes filled with tears when he saw them leave the trenches, the brave lads, running as briskly as though they didn't feel their legs stiffened by fifty days of trench-life, bad sleep, the nightmare of frost-bite, of nothing but biscuit and bully beef to eat—and then occupy the first rocks with a rush and stick there, and they would all have been killed if, at dark, Angeluccio had not volunteered to take the risk of going to tell them to come back.

("Wait, Angeluccio, till we find another man to go with you.")

"One's enough to go and get killed out there, sir. It's no use getting two done in.")



But De Cet was killed. He died like the regular hero you read of in school books. When he saw a man aiming at his lieutenant, he shouted at him: "Mind, he's firing at you, sir"—jumped in front of him, and took the bullet in his chest.

Then the enemy artillery gave it our lines hot, our parapets all knocked to bits, and now they're obviously going to attack us, and how are we going to get in those wounded with this frost, which is making the mountain smooth as ice? And the night falls rapidly, with the tap-tap of machine-guns.

The driver Corso, with the long black beard, says: "The Feltre lads at Caurià say that if the division don't take the battalion off the top they'll come themselves and relieve the old 'uns."

A sentiment of distributive justice. The dapper gentlemen of the division who shave every morning, and take tea at five, haven't got it. (No, I'm wrong: those attributes of comfort at the front are not confined to headquarters. If you go to see De Zinis you always find him shaved, as if he were about to put on evening dress, and in the shelter of that great rock he offers you tea, with Venice-wafers as blonde as the flapper of my dreams. Only, to reach him you have to pass the place where the snipers laid out that captain of the 49th, and where he lies there are more bullets than ideas about.) Well, they haven't got that sense of justice at headquarters, but those brave lads of the Feltre have it who took Cauriòl and then had a terrible fortnight beneath Busa Alta.

To get us relieved, this is what the major did.

He first sent in the state, giving strength, number of sick, and losses. No answer. Then he submitted that for fifty-five days the men had had nothing but bully beef and biscuit, and that there was danger of scurvy. Answer: a ticking off for the doctor because he sent for tincture of iodine for the wounded without a proper requisition. Then he telephoned: "If you don't relieve me, the Austrians will."

So then they relieved us.

October 25th.

General Satta, on the muddy road, is waiting for the little groups of the battalion which is coming down to rest.

"What's your battalion?"

On getting the answer, a handful of silver coins to the group.

"Go and have a drink to my health."

General Satta is a Sardinian, but he knows all the dialects, and speaks them well enough to take us all in.

Late in the evening the general meets in the village street an Alpino who is tight. (Good Lord! To have the means of banishing at one swoop fifty-five days of agony, of creating an enchanted land before one's very eyes, of putting a bit of warmth into limbs numbed by putties, wet with ten snowstorms, eaten with rheumatism—to see one's village, one's old woman, the corner of one's hearth at the bottom of the tin cup—would you wish to snatch this intoxication from a good fighter, ye drinkers of water?) Well, the Alpino is drunk, but he notices the little silver square, and raises his hand to his hat at the salute. Yes, but this effort costs him the loss of his balance, and he tumbles flat in the mud. But the strong hand of the general comes down, takes him by the scruff of the neck, and gets him on his feet again.

"What's your battalion?"

And, since the battalion is the one he thinks it is, the general presses two lire into the hand of the mazed man and says: "There, go and have another."

But the subalterns are champions of ribaldry, and they made up a little song about a certain General Satta. The song asks who was the fellow who sent us up along the road which so many went up and so few came down from. And the chorus runs exactly like this:

*E stato Satta  
che ci ha insegnato  
la stradella, la stradella  
del Cauriòl.*

(It was Satta  
Sent us up it,  
Up the alley, up the alley  
To Cauriòl.)

The other night the general came to our mess, and when we reached the champagne—which, as a matter of fact, was the same white wine of Col San Martino we drank all through dinner, only the doctor gets in a good many bottles, and says: “Down all you want”—a chorus struck up from the bottom of the table, the corner of cadets and sub-lieutenants, and the song was yelled out without reticences, including the coda.

“Rascals!” said the general, and laughed.

And this evening somebody met a massive shadow in the dark among the houses, humming under his breath as he went along. The song was the famous one about the alley: the man who hummed it was the general.

Going at a trot with Rondèl, who moves like a colt, along the smooth road which we saw from up there towards the slender pyramid of Cauriòl, rosy as a baby’s bottom. Rosy and slender is this pyramid, which was a horrible, rocky wilderness, with its unsafe lairs, a cemetery and altar of victory, a home of lice with crosses on their backs. The battalion at rest (the dead are up there, under the little, rude crosses bordered with snow). And the lurching step of the excited Alpino on the muddy road marks out wavering musical lines.

Resting means being quartered in huts without fillets between the joins of the planks, and we must set to work at once to make some or else no stove on earth will warm us; in a place where, if it snows hard, an avalanche comes down and buries us; and it means going out in the morning to dig second-line trenches and coming back at night—the fatigue-party brings up the rations. But there is the superior officer who shuts his eyes, and every now and then a little group gets off stealthily over the mountains to their homes; they delouse themselves properly, give the wife a

hug, and wait with their bundles on the road for a motor-lorry; they pursue it and carry it by assault; and then they recline among the sacks of hay, their legs spread out, and come up again looking with an air of conquerors at the road receding behind them.

*November 11th.*

We have been to Fiera di Primiero to receive the flag which the people of that place are giving us because our battalion was the first to enter it. But who will give a flag to our farrier, Edward the Bold, who was the first to enter Imèr?

He is delighted to tell of his glorious enterprise, with a wealth of detail, when he is a little tight, at the hour of confidences, in the stable heavy with the breath of the heated mules tranquilly chewing their corn, when a man goes malignantly up the scale of ranks picking holes in the platoon—and the battalion—commander. Fagherazzi has finished telling of the time in Lybia when he massacred hundreds of Arabs, sticking his bayonet into their bellies, and then, one foot on the poor prostrate wretch and crack! out it came. Scariot saw General Cantore in the Val Lagarina go out alone, alone with his adjutant, far beyond the outposts, so that his Alpini feared they would never see him come back. Giacomini counts the months he has spent in the service.

"I've been in the service fifty months. And when my wife has her kid, there'll be a lad born dressed like an Alpino, with a feather not according to regulations, an alpenstock, and a tin mug full of hot coffee; and he'll give 'un to his ma, saying: 'Here, ma, that's for thy trouble.'"

And then Edward the Bold tells his little story, while in a corner of the stable Assaba, the patient cow Assaba, of huge size and much milk, allows herself to be milked. Assaba's milk will be carried by a mule right up the icy mountain, so that the medical lieutenant may give it out to those who go sick, or who come down from the sentry-posts to the dressing-station because they got the wind-up in the night. The medical lieutenant is very wise; he has comforted many wounded with white bandages and kind

words; he has seen many a fight. Cecchet has sore feet, and walks with difficulty. "Get your hair cut," he says; "you'll be lighter and walk easier." So much for Cecchet. Bof comes forward and presses his stomach in: too many times in the night has he had to go out of the hut and expose himself to the rigor of the starry night, and he wants a remedy; but Brustolin groans and almost envies his lot, for he begs a powerful purge.

"My boy, one of you's got too much and the other too little: get together and try to even up matters between you."

Rossetto comes to protest that the doctor gave him "indoor duty" and the lieutenant made him carry planks up to the top, an hour's climb. "My lad, I gave you service in the interior of the quarters. You have no cause to grumble, since you remained within their radius."

The doctor is a very wise man: his wisdom has made us forget the story of Edward the Bold.

If anybody were to suppose that Edward was called "the bold" because of the enterprise which he himself, the evenings when the power of the wine makes him loquacious, is wont to tell to the drivers gathered to gossip in the stable smell of the hay-shed, he would be wrong. The story of the nickname is an older one. Since that day many white hairs have got woven into his fine quartermaster's beard—white as the hairs in Tomàtico's tail, of which the driver has made himself a watch-chain; white as the locks of Pupo, the most hoary-headed Alpino in the Italian army. And a woman comes into it. And if I told the story, the good Edward wouldn't send me up any more *grappa*. Besides, it would take me out of my way, for gossiping about women is too tempting a thing on an idle evening, and one's fancy turns longingly to cuddlesome fairs, and every one follows a track perfumed with memories among the communication-trenches of his heart.

Well, Edward the Bold, in the flowery June of the year of war nineteen hundred and fifteen, was walking alone, his rifle slung behind him, towards the village of Imèr, which is spread out in the bright green pastures of the Cismon valley, under the bland flood of sunlight—Imèr of the Aulic Latin name.



Tonadìco and Transaqua, more to the north, mark by their names other unspoiled memories of Latinity. The Barbarian has put up a melancholy Gothic church there, with a black gabled roof; all around, the charm of Italy flowers in the small gardens and the gay houses flecked with sun and flirting with the golden Dolomites.

Italian soldiers were showing themselves on the surrounding peaks. The Austrian soldiery had fled from the villages, which hardly dared to believe their good fortune, that no fire and rapine would mark the end of the hostile dominion. Our conquest was proceeding impetuously: a few battalions were advancing over a vast area; one section at Totoga, and at Viderne, half a day's march away, another section of the same platoon.

Edward the Bold was coming down from battalion headquarters. Imèr invited him to the plain, and it seemed to him a natural thing to pass through that gay village on his way to the ancient frontier to find the L. of C. He passed through the village: the little children and the lads were playing round the fountains, and buxom, fair-haired women were attending to the heavy labors of men. The lads stared with open eyes at the Italian Alpino who was tramping over the resounding road-setts, and stopped their game. The women, in surprise, followed with intent eyes the Italian Alpino, who was staring at them.

Edward, alas! although recognized as fully suitable to serve the King in war, although you came down from a far height and set a far-off goal in front of you, an indubitable sign that your heart was still stout and good your legs—alas! the years had rounded your portly body too lovingly and marked your hair with silver. You were not a very handsome Alpino: there were more handsome ones in your battalion, who now are sleeping under Sant' Osvaldo or on the slope of Cauriòl, watched over by living comrades who mount guard.

You were a little fat, Edward; an unesthetic sweat was running down your beard. Why, then, was the curiosity of the women so intense? Why did the urchins follow you shouting? You did not inquire. And, since a stout blonde at the door of a

shop fixed eyes of most happy surprise on you, and certain indications revealed to you that you would find some cigars there, you went in. The chorus of children stopped at the door, whence they stared at you.

Edward was so deeply conscious of the stout woman's look and smile upon himself that he began to suspect that his mature quartermasterly charms were not responsible for them. And he had his suspicions promptly confirmed by the fair one's words: "I'm right glad to see you. You're the first Italian soldier to come to our village."

Edward trembled. The first Italian soldier to enter Imèr? How? When? "Isn't Imèr occupied yet?" he stammered.

"Why, no," the stout blonde answered him, with a patriotic grin, "you're the first Italian soldier we've seen."

She grinned patriotically, the stout woman, and there was an irresistible seduction in her smile. But Edward did not see it. Edward felt on his collar the grasp of a K.K. Landesschützer intimating to him: "*Gom mit me.*" There came upon him, in a flash, the vision of an enemy patrol waiting for him at the corner of the street; he heard the crash of the rifles, and saw himself dead on the still unredeemed street of Imèr.

For certain the news had run through the village: for certain the imperial gendarmes were advancing to beleaguer the shop. Hop it, Edward, if there's still time. Preserve yourself for the pleasant life of dumps and Army Forms No. 33 R.A.; demand a strong effort of your old legs; if you don't, you'll leave your skin behind.

Edward hopped it. Out of the door he went, before the terrified eyes of the stout woman, knocking over some of the inquisitive children, and got out into the fields, cursing his imprudence: and he hurried away to where the valley narrows round the impetuous Cismon, towards the safe back areas, where the lines of occupation were clearly marked—the home of bakeries and stores, of hospitals and wise quartermasters who have no heroic fancies in their heads.

To believe yourself authorized to conclude at this point that

Edward the Bold had shown himself less worthy to wear the green flames of the Alpini would be to conclude too precipitately. Many times, since that day, Edward has behaved gallantly under fire; he cleared away materials under the bombardment, he went up to battalion headquarters on the hot days when from below you saw him wrapped in the clouds of the shell-bursts. He is worthy to wear the eagle and the feather on his hat, worthy that on his tunic should be the flames, green as the pastures in the Cismon valley, double-tongued like the precipitous twin-peaked passes from which the sentries, wrapped in their cloaks, look out.

Sergeant Da Col puffs out clouds of smoke from the porcelain pipe with the effigy of Francis Joseph which he bought at Primiero, and says: "If it wasn't yet occupied while us was so far forward on the mountains, then it wasn't meant to be occupied."

Pupo, the hoary driver, who has earrings in his ears and the most crabbed mule in the whole transport, adds: "And if a man went there by mistake, 'un couldn't do nothin' but get out of it."

Thus spoke the wisdom of the mule-drivers, in the pleasant warmth of the hay-shed: thus the assembly renders justice to Edward the Bold. And he is silent, satisfied with his tale: then Sergeant Conz begins telling how he, as corporal-major at the head of four scouts, was the first to enter Fiera di Primiero, and wanted to take off the leading citizen as a hostage.

But we have heard that one already.

### *Tezze di Valsugana.*

While the battalion is resting, Campari and I have come to do a course of training for command of a company. We hoped they would send us at least to Bassano, where we might at least see a shop, a café, a civilian or two, and enjoy at least a fortnight of living in a real house, with real beds. But they were afraid we should get too soft (or that we should see too many skrimshankers), and they put us in huts here at Tezze di Valsugana, a poor bit of back area, a dilapidated place, where walking beyond Primolano is forbidden. Amen. Together with Feruglio, Smaniotto, called the Cherub, Calmi, and Somaggio, we try to annoy

our comrades and our superiors and thus console ourselves for our disappointment.

Feruglio has left half a cheek at Col San Giovanni through the bursting of a torpedo and has got a bronze medal, and he goes about with his hat cocked at an acute angle, a draggled feather, a pipe in his mouth, a yellow greatcoat which bulges everywhere, his lean visage coming out of the collar like Brother Savonarola's out of his hood, so dilapidated that even his men call him the mule-driver—Feruglio, lounging down the street and bored by the lessons, certainly does not appear a model officer in the eyes of the excellent general staff officers who make us show up fair copies of our war experiences.

"Tell me, Feruglio, what optical resources are at the disposition of the Alpine troops?"

"The eyes, sir."

Today he got a first-class ticking-off from the major who commands the course because he does not wear the ribbon of his medal for valor. "What, you have the medal for valor and don't wear the ribbon?"

Says Feruglio, with an absent-minded look: "Well, I don't care about it; they threw it at me; I didn't deserve it, whatever it is, and I don't take any interest."

"What—what—how—how—?" the major began stuttering, amazed, as he went on to say, by such cynicism and such want of moral sense—in fact, it was a scandal, and he'd never heard such blasphemy. Poor Italy, to have such officers! So he went on for a quarter of an hour, with Feruglio standing there, swaying slightly and looking about him with an absent look, as though the major was talking about somebody else.

### *December.*

Snow on snow. Snow from the dun sky, snow from the dun ground, which the wind lifts, snow at the entrances of the burrows in the snow. Our war with winter is beginning—with its dead, with its wounded.

There has been time to make but few huts, and those are

groggy owing to the bad weather and insufficient materials: tunnels of snow lead to the warm dens dug out of the rock, caves of darkness and stench, and it's hard work for a candle to penetrate that thick fog: inside them lie the men who come in frozen and dripping from duty.

Then the wind rises, and the blizzard steams all round; the tracks, the path, the mountainside, and the holes disappear from view, and a uniform whitewash is spread over everything. The entrance to our dens is stopped up; the snow piles up in the burrow against canvas that acts as a curtain, and in the doorway, which little by little becomes closed, leveled, annihilated, in the vaporous uniformity. Every trace is blotted out. A man who was lost and wandering on the mountain now would never believe that there are people buried in its inside, living lads who breathe and eat and sleep and play cards by candlelight. If you want to know where the entrance to a dugout is, you must look carefully for the tip of the stick which has been stuck up close by to guide one to it.

They haven't been able to send up the rations yet: no sooner is the cable-way ready than the Cupola fires two well-directed shots at it and messes the whole thing up. The fatigue-parties with the bully beef toil painfully up in the fresh snow, and cling to the rail-rope to get over that great slab below Benetti's platoon. But if there's a storm, good-by, fatigue-party; three days of storm have been enough to make us suffer from hunger and put us on short rations.

When the snow stops, and the mist comes down to accumulate in the narrow valleys, the mountains emerge from that luminous sea fresh and surprised, like timid girls bathing in a lake brimful of light and revealing harmonious curves to their youthful eyes; and the sun's golden light flows over the rounded crests like softly flowing hair. Even the grim, perpendicular mountainsides have their share in the fun; gleams of light slip over the icicles that the wind has fixed on them, and all round us every trace of dirt disappears; communication trenches and parapets in their ingenuous whiteness seem not to be meant for war, but to



be a charming interweaving of footpaths for some bediamonded fairy who is traveling to the crystal cupolas of her dwelling.

Is it thou, angry fairy, who crushest in thy icy arms the dirty men who defile your filigree palace?

The clearness of the air soon awakes the sniper, tempts the guns on the Cupola, and the snow once more becomes eloquent of poundings and holes and stains; once more urine, blood, and marks of sticks appear on the snow. And then the soft peril of the avalanche gathers on high and rumbles down with a tragic moaning; unexpected, unforeseen, illogical, not where broken pines foretold its course, but by new ways, on to the huts and the dug-outs where the necessity of war has fixed them. There is no defense, no art of keeping them away. They have fallen on the kitchens and the company on the saddle, on the mules' roof and on battalion headquarters; the other day an enormous one detached itself from the summit and ended eight hundred meters lower down, smashing the wood to bits, altering the mountain's mug, and carrying away men and huts. The engineer officers calculated that the avalanche contained two million cubic meters of stuff, and said that it would go into the *communiqué*.

The roar makes one wake with a start: one rushes out to listen; one goes over the soft whiteness to bring help, under the threat which is gathering again on high. And when the sniper observes it, he begins shooting at us.

Is he wrong? He is right; he is doing his duty in injuring us where and when he can. It is our duty to give him tit for tat, instead of grousing at his cruelty; and let us not inquire what will become in peace-time of our cool habituation to homicide, what will happen to these men whom we have taught to kill so calmly. When we came up on Cauriòl, the snipers worried us at the unavoidable passages, shot at the fatigue-parties, and fired from the most unexpected places—they killed a captain as he was coming out of the advanced post, they put the devil of a wind-up a doctor who had retired beneath a tree in the attitude of Marius on the ruins of Carthage, and who had to get away in a hurry, holding up his trousers with his hand. Then we said, "We'll go one

better." And we began sniping ourselves. Sniping means waiting behind a stone, a shield, or some kind of cover, waiting till one of those fellows passes, or puts out his head, or is taking a calm look round, and firing at him in cold blood, with no immediate necessity of war, with no immediate need for defense, as one fires at a woodcock or at a target. Cruel, isn't it? But, after we had been doing it a week, they began to leave off.

The other day I came into the trenches behind a sentry, who was leaning against the snow parapet, on the watch.

"What are you doing?"

"I've copped a Boche."

"Stout fellow. And now?"

"I'm waiting for them to come to get him in, to tickle *their* ribs, too."

Forgive me, gentlemen of the Red Cross who are sitting round warm little green-clothed tables and framing the regulations of humanitarian war. I couldn't tell the man he was wrong: on the contrary, I thought it was a good idea, and I came and stood next to him with my rifle and waited myself, as though I were in a butt shooting game.

A reversal of values. A belt of wire, a great slab of ice, another belt of wire: and the man on the other side is no longer a man for me; he is a puppet, a movable target, a thing devoid of soul, and his shriek when hit is as impersonal as the sound of the wind through the loophole. No initiation was necessary for us: the first day was the same as today, and in December, 1915, at Carbonile, De Lazzer was counting the Germans that his infallible rifle had dropped with the same calm bravado as, a month ago, on De Cet hill, Dalle Mule was counting the Alpenjäger he sent flying with his bombs.

We don't think we are any crueller for that: today a tired mule, looking at us with weary eyes, arouses our pity as before; today, again, Pianezze has given all his ration of bread to the hungry, dull-eyed prisoner—greedy, clawed hands snatching the treasure. We don't think we are any crueller. . . . But these stars on our collars are enough to abolish our hereditary conceptions

of the sanctity of human life and of natural brotherhood towards those who are on the other side. Many of them must have five children at home, like Damin; eight younger brothers and a widowed mother, like Ceschin, who is so bold in the attack; we can imagine their family correspondence, the resigned, loving postcard from the distant mother, who knows nothing of politics or of social duties, and who writes in Hungarian or Czech the same words that the mother of Zanella or Rossetto writes in Venetian dialect—of her gladness that her son is well, news of the little holding and the cow, how the other sons in the army are still in good health, “and that’s all for today and always your very loving mother good-by good-by.”

How many of these postcards, jealously kept in the bulging wallet, have we not seen scattered round the corpses after the battle! I remember a photograph that came out of a Hungarian soldier’s heap of papers—his sisters and his mother; five blooming girls with indifferent faces, but in the midst the mother, with such a look of hopeless sadness in her eyes, the marks of her secret sorrow so deep around her tired mouth, that this peasant woman’s face was ennobled by them: as though it had been raised up as a symbol of all the brave or resigned mothers who are waiting on one side or the other, and know nothing, and want to know nothing, about the justice of the war, whose whole world is in that soldier son and whose whole life is in that waiting from which they will never rest till the final day.

Shall we, then, spare the life of that mummy’s boy who is within range, since we are sentimental today? That’s another pair of shoes, philosopher. We’ve got to win the war.

The light-hearted gayety of these three days’ flights to Italy on the plea of going to get cash for pay, the restless search for adventure, in the train, in the attitudes of every girl in the carriage—all my comrades who return have their stories to tell; am I never to have one? Pride, with a varnish of modesty, in showing people that we come from up here; and if one’s family is too

far away, a visit to a faithful lady friend who soothes the heart with forgotten caresses, though it's true that she, too, is far away from our hearts and does not even notice the blue ribbon on our chest, yet the silky threads of her tumbling hair form a network of merciful oblivion which takes us out of dreadful reality.

Reality is still here, and only here, in this astonishing scene of pines bending under the white snow, in the muted gurgle of a trickle of water under the ice of the frozen torrents. The lit-up sheds, stuck on the gray slopes, invite one with a deeply comforting warmth. Only Alpini and mules up there, in the austerity of the great mountains. And the seriousness of our fate accepted coolly. Fears and hopes are distant, vain things; and distant are you, my child, and your memory is vain. The gentle tedium of this snow accumulates in the heart, too. There is no future, no past: only a present uniformly prolonged, like a ski-run over easy slopes; and the hut lit by a candle stuck in the neck of a bottle, smelling of damp planks, is the fixed goal of our yesterday's aspiration.

To get pardon for our bad language we have built the chaplain a little church among the pines, with fretted eaves to its roof and a table of our dead upon the altar. But he said the Christmas Mass beneath the summit, while it was snowing a little and the mist hid us from the snipers. The mist even hid our native mountains, Cima d'Asta, and the valley. Everything was so far away, infinitely far; country, family, friends, we felt them all too absent from our frozen hearts that today no longer believe in them. There is nobody but God with us, in this exile of ice.

Let us pray to God to defend us and to let us get home safe, seeing that we are good fellows at bottom; and, if that is really impossible, to give us the good death of Morandi and Monegat, who suffered no agony.

Skis. Serenity.

But the sniper is observing us from the crag, his shot whistles high over our heads. A warning. Down below, towards Italy, the color of my sad longing spreads over the chain of Pavione.

*January 1917.*

With skis on the mountainside. How bright on the horizon the Dolomites, begemmed with ice, with black walls like columns of black marble in a cathedral, yet sparkling with light! And gleams of light shoot over the opacity of the snow. And the slopes dotted with avalanches, the grave pines, and the transparent distances irradiate light, which the sky drinks in. The panes of glass in the hut windows which shine in the sun, and the shell which comes and stifles itself comically in the thick snow, are part of the dance. A luminous holiday for our youth, for the clear brightness of our life. We are cheerful ascetics, who comfort our daily readiness for sacrifice with good wine and airy fancies. After this winter respite, which yet is war, there will come the spring, red and tumultuous with battalions thrown into the holocaust to burn for a moment in the sanctity of the offering and then to be destroyed. But today the sun is a gift of peace. For three days the blizzard confined us to the little dugout, blew atoms of ice through every crack, barricaded the door with more powerful shoulders than Bellegante's, forced a fearsome diet upon us, and filled with snow the breeches of him who wanted to take them down, if only for a moment. For three days. Today the warm stream of light floods the mountain, that is dazed by this absolute stillness. And the sun glows in a glorious summer upon our skin and under our eyelids.

Major Pisoni has a beautifully shiny and unashamed bald head. Yesterday, when he went up to the summit, no sooner did the sun burst out of the low clouds, the cloud of heavy mist disperse, and the peak come out clean and well in view of those damned



4-inchers on the Cupola, than he took his helmet off his belt and jammed it on his head. "If I don't," he explained, "the signalers up there, seeing the sun shining on my bald head, will think it's a heliograph calling, and will begin to answer."

What do they want to come up here for in our kingdom, those nosy parkers, staff officers, colonels, and big pots, now that winter and the tunnels have made us a bit more comfortable and some nights there is not even a casualty or a burying by an avalanche to report? Well, the major makes them pay their footing. No sooner does D'Incau or Pontin or some other idle fellow in the scout platoon, who knows the game, run up to say somebody is coming up the mule-track, than the major takes his glasses and goes out of his hut. If there are not more than three stars on the sleeve, the alarm is given to the whole staff, to the stretcher-bearers, to the doctor, and to the chaplain. They wait till the unwelcome visitor, blandly unconscious of his fate, attacks the steepest part of the track: and then a storm of snowballs surprises him, smothers him, and stuns him—first those of Zanella, who throws at a hundred yards' range and hits the mark; then those of the chaplain, which are the hardest, and the major's, which are the neatest, and the enormous blocks from the doctor, who chips great pieces out of the path with a pick. The visitor comes up breathless, in terror and amazement, stunned, blinded, and bruised, and recognizes in the gallant slinger who is directing the fire the commander of the position in person, and has to stand at attention to him into the bargain and put a good face on it.

"Lieutenant So-and-So. I have to report, sir . . ."

"Later on, later on," interrupts the major. "Come in now and have a drink."

There is a still surer dodge for keeping mere sightseers off the top. There are always three or four mines ready, out of the way, some distance from the shelters. And as soon as a telephone message comes from battalion headquarters to say that an evil-minded visitor has arrived down there, and is getting a white shirt and an alpenstock from Damin to come up in, tratatata—

one after another the mines go off with the prescribed noise, blocks of rock and stone hum through the air and dance a regulation ballet on the snow as they pound it. A minute's silence: and then—zeem choom zeem choom!—the Germans from the Cupola plunk the unfailing half-dozen shots on the mountain exactly where the mines went off.

"I don't understand," the major grunts sardonically, looking upwards with his eyes half closed. "They have been so quiet till just now."

But the visitor all at once feels a nostalgia for the valley below, where the Cupola has no interest in dropping shells, and, when mines are let off, there are policemen to tell you it is dangerous to pass by.

We are not pure, not even we.

Gossiping, spilling poison from forked tongues.

Egoism in the cloak of cleverness.

Fear of death hidden in a thousand disguises.

Give me your lantern, Diogenes, that I may look into the hearts of my brother officers, to look for that which I haven't got—sanctity of ideals, the purity of the holocaust . . . and I do not even glance into my own heart, for fear of finding there abysses too dark.

One is seized, sometimes, by boredom.

Boredom with time that passes slowly, which rapidly sums up a tumultuous past in a few colorless lines.

Boredom at being unable to express a tangle of images which cut across the hollowed-out porcelain of the snow.

Boredom with incoherence.

Fits of doubt, of fear, eruptions from the untouched and unexplored sediment at the bottom of the heart; doubt whether, after all, this traditional concept of country is worth so much pain, so much destruction.

Today I should like to be a skrimshanker.

March 1, 1917.

I had already understood that, after Busa, they wanted to push me also out of the battalion. And so here I am sent to a ski company.

"But I have never taken a course."

"You ski all day under Busa Alta."

"But I fall."

"Those who have done a course fall too."

"But what on earth made you pick out me of all people?"

The reason was this. They had seen a photograph of me in peace-time which shows me with skis on my feet; and this appeared to the high command to be a decisive proof of my excellence as a ski-runner. Amen. I reach Zortèa; I find two nice little platoons of skiers from the Val d'Aosta; I substitute French and Piedmontese for Venetian when I talk to the men; and I immediately make Lanier, who is a guide of Courmayeur and talks to me of Mont Blanc and Innominata, a corporal.

"Why aren't you a corporal already, Lanier?"

"Well, ye see, climbin' up the glaciers, *c'est une autre affaire* than makin' war. *Si c'est pour monter les montagnes n'y a pas* the devil himself who'd make me afraid. But I got to the battalion late because I'm third category. And there I learnt the salute from a *pays* who was sucking *la lait* when my beard was already sproutin'."

And in the evening, when the sun has gone down and the men go to eat their dinners, I have two hours' schooling alone on the freshly frozen snow, so as not to cut too poor a figure with these virtuosos.

Captain Ripamonti, an Alpino of the old school—five wounds, with the finest fights of the Alpini on his record; Montenero, Mrzli, Malga Fossetta, Caldiera, Adamello—consoles me:

"You're a volunteer, too, aren't you? Like me. Well, the cooking is good, the wine is better, and in the house where you're staying there's a pretty girl, and it isn't written that we shall all leave our skins behind. We'll have a drink once we get to the top."

And, seeing that we are considered a legion of the lost, we call the patrol officer of the company "Suicide."

*March 20th.*

Unexpected orders to leave for the plateau with my ski company. The pleasantness of the march along the roads; the brightness of the inn parlor; merry, willing women looking out of doors.

We don't want to think of the future, which is a future of battle. Captain Vigevani drinks with Busa and me good-by to the battalions who are remaining on the glittering summits, the battalions that were ours. He says: "This time, Busa, none of us three comes back." But this light sun is like a sparkling light wine, and today we are almost content with our trade, a little proud of these new trappings—skis, ski-sticks, and white pouches—which surprise people as we go by, though they have already seen so many soldiers pass. At the rear of the column, a crystal-clear song like the foam of a river, like the breath of glaciers and frosty spring-tides. It is my Valdostans, who are singing:

*Dans le jardin de mon père les lilas sont fleuris,  
tous les oiseaux du monde y viennent faire leur nid,  
auprès de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon, qu'il fait bon,  
auprès de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon dormir.*

*Il y avait la tourterelle et la jolie perdrix,  
qui chante pour les filles qui n'ont pas de mari,  
auprès de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon, qu'il fait bon,  
auprès de ma blonde, qu'il fait bon dormir.*

We shall come back, my mountain lads, if God protects us, to the little Alpine gardens enclosed by low stone walls, dazzling in the reflection of the glaciers; we shall come back to "lap the cream" from the pans of warm milk; we shall climb again the great, aristocratic mountains in their ermine crinolines (these Dolomite peaks are as bald and bare as leprous beggars). But now don't think too much about it, otherwise you'll get homesick. Tonight we shall sleep in this town which has a name out of a

story-book, and that rogue of a Regina who keeps the inn will pour good wine into your mess-tins, even if you don't speak her dialect.

*Si le vin est bon, nous y resterons—ici;  
si les femmes sont belles ici, nous y passerons la nuit—ici.*

*Encore un petit verre de vin pour nous mettre en route,  
encore un petit verre de vin pour nous mettre en train . . .*

*Bologna, April 1917.*

My friend Nino is right. Being on leave convinces one that one will come out of the war alive. We go once more up to the valleys festive with light, to the inexhaustible snowfields, to rations on the ground amid the stiff little forest of skis fixed in the snow, in the glow of sun and youth that passes away, but showers marvelous gifts upon our life of today, in the certainty of battle tomorrow.

Some of the young squirts of officers have had their heads turned by being among picked men and by these words of General Headquarters: "The ski battalions must be used like drops of gold." So these swankers say that the skiers, the cavalry of the mountain, will be given a white collar with green flames to put on their tunics. But the older men shake their heads and make them stand drinks for offending against tradition.

And today orders have come to be ready to hand in skis and muskets, because they must put us on foot: and it would be time, for every day now we have to climb higher and higher to find a worthy pasture for these lusty, giddy skis. One of my men has written a Vedic phrase to his family: "Our horses feed on snow."

*"L'uomo selvaggio ha in sè cotal natura, che piange quando vide il tempo bello però che la tempesta lo spaura."* ("The savage man is so by nature made that when he sees fine weather he must weep, although the tempest maketh him afraid."<sup>1</sup>) I, too, a savage

<sup>1</sup> Quotation from Cecco Angiolieri, Dante's contemporary.



man, grieve for my flowering cherry-tree, although others will taste its juicy fruit; and I grieve for the garden, all fresh and green and thick with wonderful spring growths, where I have put the kitchen and the mess, an earthly paradise from which we shall be expelled one day, sooner or later, and we shall pass from this peace to the great roar and lively *mêlée* of the plateau.

On reconnoissance over the plateau lines, for certain future operations about which we touch our stars. An acropolis of ice and sluggish waves of mist—and the cheeky sniper who bangs at our trench-shields. In the evening we leave for Bassano in motor-lorries, a twenty-four hours' drive into Italy, a whiff of sensuality and peace. Houses are broken into. Danger of a saucepan on one's head. The reek of hospital buildings. And let's hope the major will shut an eye, and we'll get as far as Padua.

The reconnoissance on the plateau gave a second baptism of fire. Ta-pun, shrapnel; I hadn't heard any for two months. And the counselors of King David decided to give him a young girl, who should warm him by lying in his bosom. And death is a divine maiden.

But at Padua, the prostitute whom I left unclothed and tumbled, the lazy arch of dreams upon her rank-smelling lips—and the unknown with the square chin, her soft little person swathed tightly in mourning, with a little golden lock upon her marble forehead. I shall never see her again; she will lose herself in her life. *Quien sabe?* But some day, when I am feeling full of after-war bitterness and I am begging impassible fate for another tempestuous intoxication with life like this vigil before death, if I meet her at the corner of a sunlit street I shall kneel down before her and ask her for the alms of a smile.

Orders come to move. Again. Like dogs that cock their legs at every corner. Packs, skis, baggage, arms, cook-boxes, all are

piled up pell-mell and are transported at a lively jig in which helmets, tin cups, lice, and curses get lost. It is no use taking a fancy to the little corner decorated with Salon de Paris postcards, or to this cup stolen from the Grand Hotel, or to this shell-case which fell nearer than the others. Worse than gypsies, leaving the packs behind so as to be lighter; the mules will carry the packs, and it's no good grousing if they arrive pillaged.

In the peace of the green plain the war is a distant thing, with little distant clouds of shell-bursts on Cima Dodici. How hard and fierce the harsh spring in the sudden torrents and on the summits still inlaid with snow!

Elements of peace (a little lake, ruins which have become romantic a year after the bombardment, pastures—you seem to hear the ding-dong of the cowbells).

Elements of sentiment.

Elements of slackness. For, deceived by this calm period of waiting before battle, the heart sometimes gives way to building castles in the air and vain day-dreams, even thinking about life after the war.

Meanwhile, doomed to die, we are making roads. Get down to it, short-lived ones; we must be made use of before we become corpses rotting in all the irony of our spick and span equipment, so that our rest may not be too luxurious and we may not grasp at life again with too confident hands. The roads are leveled, the mines go off, and the companies come back in the evening with their tools on their backs, singing some melancholy dirge of love.

*Eco che le passa,  
ste quatro moscardine;  
le xe bianche e verdoline,  
colori no le ghe n'à.*

*Sul ponte di Bassano  
la ci darem la mano,  
la ci darem la mano  
ed un bacin d'amor.*

*Per un bacim d'amore  
xe nati tanti guai:  
io non credevo mai  
doveri da lasciar.*

(See those four dainty maidens  
Go sadly down the vale;  
Their cheeks have lost their roses,  
Their looks are wan and pale.

And as we leave Bassano  
We'll clasp each pretty miss,  
We'll clasp each pretty miss, boys,  
And give her one last kiss.

For one last kiss of love, dear,  
How sorely grieves the heart:  
I never thought, my darling,  
That we should have to part.)

The sky now losing color, the icy peaks now growing rigid,  
devoid of light or shade, and the hoarse warning of distant gun-  
fire, all chime in with the sad, plaintive song. Let us, then, sing,  
we officers, the gay song of the fifth Alpini:

*Giovinezza, giovinezza,  
primavera di bellezza.*

Youth. All our blood glows with it. Our muscles are charged  
with its fair current. Impetuous, spendthrift youth, like the bound-  
ing of hand-grenades down a rock-chimney; youth of short  
leaves, when the three o'clock in the morning adventure gratifies  
the senses, all a-thrill; youth fatigued with watching, soaked with  
rain, beaten by the tempest, our red youth of war, how soon you  
will be a thing of the past! Yes, for meanwhile something is bur-  
rowing in the flesh or in the head—a sharp finger, a web of  
treacherous pains, a warning stab. And it is not true that train-  
ing hardens you. Some shoulders of the 1891 class are less re-  
sistant now to the pack, and their eyes do not always have a

thoughtless gleam, even when the fire of the bottle lights them up.

Here, in this idyllic repose, war-weariness sometimes takes us by surprise. weariness of this incessant going out and coming in, of sheltering peace and sudden flame of battle, without change. May is already drawing to an end, towards the June of slaughter and reaping, and our peace is nothing but a refinement of the torture of waiting to be caught again in the threshing-machine.

The brilliant triangle of Cassiopeia is already in the sky: the sharp smell of rations comes from the encampment. The song dies away.

*Doversi da lasciare,  
volersi tanto bene,  
l'è un mazzo di catene  
che m'incatena il cor . . .*

(That we should have to part, dear,  
When we have loved so well,  
Is like a bunch of fetters  
That chains my heart to Hell.)

### *June 6th.*

The battalion under arms; red faces against the setting sun; a gray square against the background of the meadow; force of impetus locked in the close ranks. On the eve of events.

We leave in the evening for the destination so long known in our secret hearts. To look down at the river in the valley in the moonlight gives one a delicious feeling of giddiness. Then, little by little, nothing remains but the fatigue of the march and the weariness of not arriving; we have been climbing since yesterday evening and already the sun on high is striking on the slabs of the mule-track and coating our throats with thirst. A road of suffering. Those who climbed it last year, with the battalions that left living tatters on these rocks, from Cima Isidoro to the Caldiera, at every halt, repeat the names of hills and dead.

A half-day's halt in the shade of the pine-woods—then on again, at night, drowsy.

A night march over the plateau. Coolness breathed from the first sheets of snow. We pass near the great fires of the bivouac beside which the assaulting party of tomorrow are snoring in the thick, healthy reek of the encampment.

I think: "Poor devils!"

Every lot seems sadder than my own: not to be destined for the first wave seems to me enormous good luck, and I am amazed that those men can sleep so calmly who tomorrow will cast out of the trench everything that binds them to life. And I am afraid for them. (Not unlike the way I have sometimes suffered from giddiness as I looked from the meadow at a man clinging to the precipitous rock-wall: and the next day I myself followed in his tracks with indifference.)

So at last we arrive under Cima della Caldiera at dawn, and bivouac amid snow, rocks, and a few pines.

*June 10th.*

Bombardment since dawn. Advance guards of monsters sound the assembly on the sky's gray drum. And towards evening, under the storm, Alpini leap forward to the capture of Ortigara.

But we, huddled against the rocks of the Caldiera, feel the reaction of the enemy's guns fall severely on our uncertain defenses. Yes, but there is a smell of victory. Prisoners are coming in, frightened to death by the violence of the bombardment. The stretchers with the first wounded arrive. The fatigue-party of mules arrives with water-skins, concertina-wire, ammunition, and cook-boxes. The reënforcing troops, the engineers, the carriers, march out: all over a lane, four yards wide, cut out of the mountainside, a regular, tangled, confused heap of men and animals, wounded and carriers, a want of coherence and preparation that is amazing. A mule kicks beside the stretcher placed on the ground because there is a queue of them in front and the doctors have more than they can do to wash, cut, and bandage the fresh flesh that's brought to them: night comes down, dark and stern;



the groans of the wounded lying on the ground are low and ceaseless, full of despair and discouragement.

We go out to carry trench stores.

On this side the night lives a tangible life of its own, a life of explosions, shot with rockets, agitated by sudden alarms. And the rocks take life, too, from the cold gleam of the rockets; the peaks dart out of the night and fall back into it again, in continuous alternation, lashed by the bombardment.

And then the sky is dissolved in rain. When we come in, on the blocked road, there are still the files of stretchers uncovered in the rain, the groaning of the wounded, the shrieks of those who are being dressed, and the swearing of the drivers: and every now and again the swish and flash of the shell which covers and annihilates all. One fell clean on a dressing-station; no sign was left of the doctor and wounded. Confusion, restive animals, a sharper scream (some mule has trodden on a wounded man, it seems): then the caravans begin to move again, only one has to be careful where one treads in the mess of the blown-up hut.

*June 13th.*

Yesterday, when it was raining cats and dogs, there were four of us playing a game of cards under Captain Ripamonti's tent, very glad that the low mist had made the enemy guns leave off. We had hardly made this remark when a shell we didn't reckon on arrived, and a big splinter came into the tent and hit Dorsa in the abdomen. Dorsa turned pale, and then, with a smile on his fresh boyish face, said: "Only a bruise. I shall soon be all right."

However, the doctor sent him to hospital, for you never know. And this morning he died.

General Porta comes back from the fight limping, a pair of large spectacles on his sunburnt face, and his hood comically wrapped round his head.

"How are things going up there, general?" asks one who is bold enough.

"I don't know if I am living by a miracle or a dead man resuscitated," answers the general, and lurches off down the communication trenches.

Lieutenant Zucchi has only one passion—racing. He only cares about one thing—what won the Ambrosian prize. But before the *Sportsman* arrived they sent him out with the fatigue-party to the Agnella pass. I found him this evening, under a hail of shells which always carry off one of our men—and it is a shame to see the companies getting worn out like this without even the glory of attacking—and I gave the comforting news that he could come back.

"That's good. One can't live here. Losses all the time. I'm glad. Do you know what won the Ambrosian?"

I do know, and tell him, knowing that he won't like it, since he backed another horse that wasn't even placed.

"Alcione."

"Damn!" Zucchi begins swearing. And I see him going off cross and angry, cursing the racecourse stewards and his own rotten luck.

All the enemy artillery, from the Corno di Campo Bianco to the Salubio, when they are tired of battering the foremost troops, have a go at the reserves, at us who are clinging as best we can to the rocks of the Caldiera. It happened this morning: a hail of big ones, great splitting bursts that raised a thick smoke which caught one's throat. We heard afterwards that it was nothing, but at first there was an alarm.

"Poison gas! On with your gas-masks!"

A general tumult. I rush out of the tent; I see faces and hands busy with the apparatus; Zanella comes up panting and sticks my mask over my mouth, and in a few instants we are transformed into grotesque monsters snuffing the air with their snouts. Suddenly Bovolacci da Forlì arrives running, long and gawky, waving his arms and legs wildly, and crying in a plaintive voice: "Who'll give me their mask? I haven't got a mask. Who'll give me a mask? Who'll be a true friend?"

June 25<sup>th</sup>.

An unexpected reveillé of shell-fire. The dawn is only a shy pallor, and the bombardment has been going on for two hours with a violence it has never before had. Out of my fleabag, to see what's going on. In an instant the two huts down on the spur have disappeared: a crash of timber and tin roofing, and, when the smoke has cleared away, a mule-driver running up the road dragging his reluctant mule after him. Talmone says: "Here comes the runner with orders."

In fact, a little later, stand to. It's our turn.

A blank verse line gets stuck in my head, and I go on monotonously mumbling it: "Our day has come, and we have got to conquer."<sup>1</sup> The men fall in along the road, against the rock. I do not look at their faces: but I am conscious of the calm resignation to the inevitable behind them. For a fortnight we have been looking on at the same performance: battalions go out, stretchers and dead come back, and a few days or a few hours later, the survivors. And today the rhythm seems more violent, and we shall go out under a shining sun which will make our figures stand out with cruel clearness on the lip of the trench when we leave it to go down into the dip of Agnelizza and make a counter-attack.

"Our day has come, and we have got to conquer."

I cease to think. I busy myself with minute details. I give orders to my batman, and I am glad that they sound so sharp and precise (there's no dullness at the back of my voice). Presentiments? No, I have no presentiments. I look at the sky, already full of light; at the orange and black shrapnel-bursts; at a file of mules rapidly moving away down at the corner of Cima Lozze. Tightly swathed and weighed down by my pouches, my slung musket, my putties, my haversack, and my helmet, I feel that they all constrain me to direct action and activity: I feel myself a good tool, ready to be used, directed by a will which is inexorably outside me.

<sup>1</sup> A quotation from *La Canzone di Legnano*, by Carducci.

The captain says: "Off we go."

At the mouth of the cave, their backs against the wall, three or four telephonists, a trench-mortar captain, and an artillery observer look at us with eyes in which I am afraid to read too deeply. (Good God, are we for it as badly as that?) They know me, but say nothing: I feel they do not dare to say a word of good luck to us, for it would sound silly and ironical. But Tissi finds the right word.

"*Ciào*, boys! And don't be afraid, for I'll see to it you get enough to eat and drink."

No sooner had Dr. Dogliotti put his head above the trench than it was smashed by a nose-cap. The whole side of the Caldiera down which we have to go is covered with little shell-craters. But the hidden machine-guns which wait at the unavoidable passages, and almost always catch us, seem worse. There is a little heap of dead, however, that gives warning. Then one takes breath for a moment, one's whole life passes into a moment's regret, a presentiment pops up and is repelled in terror—and one plunges into danger. Three or four bullets whistle by—it's over.

The sapper Vanz, leaning back against the rock that shelters him, draws breath and comments on the whistling: "They call *zio zio* (uncle), and we aren't even relations."

But Captain Vigevani stayed there.

Before going down into the dip, we put on our jolly old masks, for they were firing gas-shells all the morning. But, after five minutes of running, leaping, and jumping, who can possibly get his breath through that choker? At first I try to get a few stealthy breaths by lifting my mask a little; and then, never mind what happens, I take it off, put it back in its box ("*The man who takes off his mask dies: keep it always with you*"), and gulp in the air greedily.

Then, down over the Agnelizza valley, chock full of dead—the skeletons of last year's battle, and the swollen corpses of this year's

battle that has lasted a fortnight. And a shining skull grins next to the livid mask of a man killed yesterday.

On the slippery footpath I have *got* to cross—there is no other road, and even here where I am waiting great shells have fallen—six, seven fresh corpses, mown down by machine-guns, warn me. However, I've got to pass. A mountain gunner is standing there hesitating, and says to me: "Two of us came here. One is that man there; he was laid out. I got through. But now, what about going back?" Another pause. Then: "Let's try; we've got to try." And the gunner makes the sign of the cross and dashes off. "Tatata!" But he's got through unhurt, and is caracoling down the rocky slopes between one shell-burst and the next.

Beyond the ridge, all at once, I see a frightful scene, a bit of Dante's Malebolge made real. The hundred men of the company scattered about the ledges of a great, livid, burnt, leprous wall of rock, clinging to the boulders, mingled with the red and white stains made by the wounded: they are motionless and silent under the tempest of the bombardment from which they have no shelter, in their forced exposure to the danger that comes from every side, with wide eyes staring in the implacable light of noon.

"Get away from there, sir, for they're shooting at you. Come over here where it's safe."

A moment of indecision, and suddenly a bullet pierces the heart of the brave lad who wanted me to be in safety near him.

I meet Casagrande, and we go together to look for a brigade headquarters, which we find buried in complete darkness and silence at the bottom of a grotto: we give them the good news that two battalions of us have come up for the counter-attack, and this surprises the headquarters, who know nothing about it and greet us without enthusiasm, and would have perhaps preferred us to have stayed at home. They stand there in the den



abandoned, humiliated, resigned to the worst, officers and orderlies. The general says to us: "As you see, we are surrounded by the enemy, who can do what they please with us."

We see, we see. But we two have reached them, so there are holes in the net, and what does the general say to that? The general then gives Casagrande the operation order: "I entrust the recapture of hills 2,003, 2,101, 2,105 to the honor of the Cuneo and Marmolada battalions." We salute and go away, opening a passage through the heap of some fifteen soldiers who are blocking up the mouth of the cave and preventing egress—runners, machine-gunners, with two unused machine-guns, huddled together, lying down behind a shelter of sandbags and branches; they do not stir as we pass, and make no protest even when we walk on their bodies or their heads.

Here we are outside again, and Casagrande wants to go that way, and I think it would be better to go this, and to think that the safety of our lives may depend on our decision. Don't you see those shell-holes down there? Yes, but they won't fire again for a bit where they have just fired. We must make up our minds, or else they'll get us here. Here we are on dead ground. No, we aren't, the machine-guns from 2,003 have our range. Jump down here, damn it. Look at that great crump just where you wanted to go. Bzzzz-choom! That was a good 'un. Glued to the very rock: God, if only one's helmet was as big as a boiler! However, when we get to the bottom, I have only grazed a finger and bruised a knee.

But now the mountain rises steeply, the path goes into the rock wall, and there is no other way but to jump down from this crag seven meters high on to the terrace below, and let's hope I break my leg, seeing a splinter hasn't got me, so that I may have done with this inferno and be taken to hospital. During the jump a tenth of a second's fright, for my eye caught a little heap of petards below, and, if but one of them went off as I landed, a blinking clever wound that would be! Down like a sack of potatoes. The petards didn't explode, the leg didn't break, so down

we go by leaps and bounds, with the mountain crashing about our ears.

Incoherent orders. Somebody is losing his head in the higher command. Under this bombardment, which, in the enemy's intention, should annihilate us, the telephone is cut off every five minutes, then comes on again suddenly. That's due to that little section of signalers, a corporal and a few men, who are heroes—always out looking for the break, even on that muck-heap of the snow, the Agnella pass, where there are more holes than ground—alone, without officers, with no pride of distinctions on their collars—two have already left their skins at the job, but the others go on, and every time they come to ask to test the line, I want to put the hat with the eagle's feather on their heads, for they deserve it.

At night, the 297th attacks with a rush, and successfully recaptures Hill 2,003.

Suddenly Captain Ripamonti asks for reinforcements. There is a company, thirty men, of another battalion. Up with them. Then, to rake together a few more remnants to send them, I dislodge from among the stones and overhanging rocks a few men without units, who are waiting for nightfall to come in. I find no insult more deadly than this to rouse them: "Skrimshankers!"

"Out with you, skrimshankers! You've got to go and reinforce the company on the top."

And the men, cursing, come out and go forward, slowly, along the ridge of rock which seems to afford a certain protection: and one of them murmurs between his teeth: "Blast if he didn't call us skrimshankers, after we've been clambering about these crags all this time!" And the little Bersagliere in command of a machine-gun section comes too and says: "Do you want me? I'll come up with you at once, my brave lads. I'm glad to work with you." Enthusiastically, quickly, he takes his men and guns, gets up to the top, jumps into the battered trench, and the first bullet gets him and lays him out at once.

No, it doesn't pay being gallant.

God knows how long the bombardment of every caliber from all four points of the compass, which burst out immediately afterwards, lasted, lighting an immeasurable firmament of flashes in the night. Under that tempest, among the bowlders, against a rock, wherever the mountain seems to offer protection, motionless we offer up our flesh—and tattered thoughts—waiting endlessly for a flare, a shock, to plunge us into nothingness.

The teeth of a man near me are chattering ceaselessly, with an exasperating noise. And the rattling of his mess-tin marks the trembling of his limbs, in the pauses of the uproar. Another, his face buried between two stones, is murmuring desolately, "There ain't no God, there ain't no God."

But there were also some who went to sleep.

Enemy over our heads, enemy on our flanks, and those batteries firing on our rear from the Salubio. It was the last straw when the little corporal of signals came to tell us that, after a half-day's interruption, telephonic communication with divisional headquarters was restored!

"My God!" exclaimed Captain Réan. "We're surrounded."

The division sends word that if we are in need of reënforcements we can use the Tirano battalion. We have only got to dig it out, for it has been in the battle for two or three days and nobody knows what has happened to it. The runners finally succeed in sending to the major a little group of men, three dozen in all, commanded by a captain who carries his arm, smashed by a bullet, slung to his neck.

"Are you the Tirano battalion?" asks the major.

"Yes, sir."

"All here?"

"All here."

"Then, forward the Tirano battalion of the 5th Alpini," says the major. "Go to Hill 2,003 to reënforce the 297th company of the Cuneo battalion."

"Very good, sir," answers the officer, without a curse. And off he goes, and the three dozen—all that the battle has spared out

of the six hundred they were the other day—follow him, grimaced but silent. They climb towards the hill in the dark. But Captain Ripamonti, up there, when he saw this little dribble of reënforcement, this ghost of a battalion, began cursing and swearing that if the division were mad he had a head on his shoulders and a heart in the right place. "I'm in command here, by God," he said, "and there's no need of reënforcement against these lousy Boches, but these lads deserve six months' leave instead of being sent into the fight again." And he sent the captain and his men back to Cima Campanaro, that they at least might save their skins.

We have been up here for two days, reluctantly waiting from moment to moment for the shell that will smash us. The doctor says we have already fifty per cent. losses. One mentally takes refuge in the last ten per cent., and hopes that at least that will get back. When the bombardment stops, when the impetus of attack has passed in which death seems light and easy and one feels transfigured by that irrevocable will to sacrifice which is the beauty of war—at the first pause, even in the uncertainty of the moment that follows, in the very fear of the inferno that will begin again, there returns to me the presumptuous certainty of surviving; with that stupid, conceited optimism which makes of my ego the center of the universe, and tries hard to find in every event, distant or near, a logical reason for the continuation of my life. Only—just superstition—one tries to stifle that feeling of certainty.

When the bombardment stops a vast silence spreads. Then a few "Ta-puns," lonely, comic, feeble—though perhaps the enemy doesn't perceive the irony of them—in this frightening calm. Then groans from the wounded. Then silence once more. And the mountain is infinitely taciturn, like a dead world, with its snow-fields soiled, the shell-craters, and the burnt pines. But the

breath of battle wafts over all—a stench of excrement and dead bodies.

A man is afraid. He stands with his back against the rock wall, weak-kneed, abject. Are you afraid of the shells, man? He is afraid of the shells, of the night, of his rank, and of his fate. And it is his very life that is annihilated at this moment—that which was its worth, that little silver square on his arm that he was proud of, those medal ribbons which we desire for ourselves and which disgust us on him. There is nothing left now, nothing but an animal texture of skin, flesh, and gray cloth, with a fixed grimace on its features, an immobility of hopelessness. He would react against this stupid order to die, if he were not afraid; but he submits to it instead with a dull, emotionless smile. But we have to say “Major” to him, and obey him tomorrow, and the day after see him with a new ribbon on his tunic because his battalion let itself be butchered gallantly.

There’s another man spoiled by the battle. A fit of coughing irritates him. So, do not talk, or he will fly into a temper. He is like a drunken man who doesn’t want to show his state and controls himself: he talks under his breath and cocks his ear for imaginary noises. Three days of fighting have trepanned his skull, three sleepless nights have sucked him dry. What is happening of such importance that he must interrupt the detailed orders he is giving to stare intently at that corner of the cave? There is something there that won’t do. Those sandbags. They must be picked up and placed in an orderly heap, one on top of another. And in silence. There, now he can speak. No, one moment. There’s another there at the back. There, that one, too, is placed on the heap. That’s right. “Now listen, you and your men . . .” Commanding officer’s neurasthenia.

When *we* are afraid, it is a different thing.

Two nights ago, when those whizz-bangs were coming down ten at a time, the captain who was lying flat on the ground was



seized with a feverish shuddering. He spoke: "It is too much for me. I'm afraid. I know it. I always get it like this. I die twenty times over in this awful agony of waiting for the attack, under the artillery preparation. But in an hour, blast it, you'll see I shall cast my fear away, when they attack us, and the people down below will call me a hero and compliment me. But now I can't stand it, I can't stand it."

That's our honest fear, which reacts desperately against itself, which gives light and life to thoughts of gallantry, which holds positions and which ennobles our agony of terror!

Busa and Battaglia, Alpini in the sight of God, are having a chat in the midst of the battle, under the shelter of a great rock that has got jaundice from so much gas and shells. Busa has invited Captain Battaglia to dinner.

"Marimonti is going to send it up to me. You'll see, Battaglia, what lovely macaroni! and what Breganze wine!"

Here he is, an Alpino with the basket, walking cautiously among the exclamation marks of the whizzing bullets and a few full stops made by shells, searching anxiously for the officer in command.

"Here, Alpino, put the basket here."

The man does not wait to be told twice, for those three stars on the sleeve are a categorical imperative. Besides, he is glad to get back to the dead angle where the kitchens are; he puts down the basket and makes off as fast as his legs will carry him.

"Now, just look, Battaglia."

Captain Battaglia searches the inside of the basket curiously with his eyes. Busa gets to work emptying it, and pulls out, with growing annoyance, delicately complicated little dishes, pastries, galantine, a roll of snow-white napkins, gleaming porcelain, and all.

"Bless my soul, Busa, what luxury. But it seems to me all stuff without substance."

"I can't make it out," the other grumbles under his breath. "Instead of macaroni—"

"And where's the Breganze wine?"

There it is, the bottle; a round belly, a silver neck. Spumante. Busa is completely mystified.

"Let's drink, anyhow. But what on earth was Marimonti thinking about?"

Battaglia, although he puts down those neurasthenic pastries, rags his friend the whole time. "God, Busa, you do yourself in war better than if you were the general."

Yes, but if Busa had been the general he wouldn't have got anything to eat. Because it was not till they got to the bottom of the basket that they noticed there was a note inside, and on the note the name of General Porta, the proper destinatory of the meal. However, since General Porta is an Alpino and understands certain things, when the two guilty ones sent him the scanty remains and their apologies, he replied with a very polite little note.

Corporal-Major Pesavento will carry the report to headquarters, because the telephone line is irremediably broken. "Wait for dark," the adjutant advises him.

"The artillery fire at dark, sir. Better to try now, when they aren't firing."

Down the hill he goes breakneck, then crosses the dip all blocked with abandoned stores and corpses, and so far all is well, the snipers haven't noticed him. Now they are beginning, as Pesavento begins the climb up, "Ta-pun! ta-pun!" The shots sound quite jolly, in the afternoon tranquillity. But we tremble, our eyes fixed on the Alpino's progress, our hearts held in taut suspense: no drama, we thought, could be more terrible than that at which we are looking on, of a man alone under the enormous mountain who is being hunted by the lurking enemy. And the path is long and steep, and the sniper patient. "Ta-pun! ta-pun!" If only Pesavento could get to that corner! The communication trench begins there. All our eyes are upon him, as though they could make a

cuirass for him. Another twenty yards, and he is safe. It is true that is the worst point: other dead are there to prove it. "Ta-pun!" Pesavento collapses all at once upon the path. And there he lies, without a tremor, without a kick, stiff. And twenty minutes later, anybody looking through field-glasses to see if by any chance he is only wounded sees the nails in his boots gleaming motionless in the sun.

Half an hour later Jardella gave a yell, and called out: "Look at Pesavento!"

Pesavento had got up with a bound, covered the twenty yards' rise like lightning, and had already plunged into the communication trench. The enemy, fooled, let off two angry and innocuous rounds at the authentic corpses on the path.

Now what on earth is in that yellow envelope that the *carabiniere* is bringing straight into the heart of the battle from divisional headquarters, after getting over the difficult pass up the valley? Perhaps relief (some dilapidated battalion that has been furbished up may be relieving us, for they have all been through the mill two or three times)—or is it an operation order? Something much more important: a circular which laments the excessive consumption of steel nibs, and another piece of paper equally urgent.

Poor devil, he is much upset when the major tells him of it. But we console him with a glass of wine, of which we always have plenty even out here, because Tissi does things well when he does them at all, and to be sure that wine and provisions are reaching us he sometimes comes himself with the fatigue-party, at the risk of being plugged on the way.

If one closes one's eyes a moment while standing wedged like this between two bits of rock, sleep takes one immediately with a clap on the back of the neck. And when one is woken up with a kick, one rises laboriously up to the surface of a dark ocean in which all one's personality seemed to have been utterly dissolved. One gets an acute pain in one's temples and forehead from the effort to reconnect, to come back from that infinitely distant exile to the reality of one's doom.

Our doom is this brassy sky inexorably weighing on our skulls, this welter of rotting dead flesh, this hard stretch of rock to which we are nailed by our trade as the butterfly upon the wooden case of a collector. Yes, our trade. Barrack jokes keep solitarily buzzing in one's empty brain, like bluebottles out of season: "Did you want the feather?" "Did you sell the cow?" "Did you take the butter to the major that he might put you in the Alpini?" It was a sack they put us in, and at intervals the jolly butcher takes us and throws us out on the blood-stained counter: then, when it's over, he will collect those who are still good for another time and put them in the sack again. One's got to make the best of it, until one gets plugged in the belly oneself, seeing that the body gives itself no heroic airs and renounces none of its necessities. We steal the tinned meat from the dead, we drink from dead men's water-bottles, we make the dead into bullet-shields and foot-warmers. Barro gets up for a moment to undo his breeches, but stays with us all the same: it would be ridiculous for him to go and get a bullet out of modesty. And he has hung his pouches on that bare thighbone poking out of the rock, a relic from last year.

Now the third night and the fourth day of the battle have gone by. In the evening the softness of the sunset, in the pause of the hurly-burly, overcomes even this horror. Violet harmonies of the distances in the dead ground, and those remote pastures already immersed in the mists of night, are like a promised land on which war has not laid its heavy hand.

At dawn shouts of attack, victory, and death in the darkness. A fitful alarm, then a face marked with blood which tells us what has happened.

The garrison of 2,003 is overcome, the Austrians are here; the doctor telephones that they are already at his cave and he is retiring: useless to call him on the telephone, he doesn't answer. And Private Pretto arrives and tells how it occurred and how he

escaped after being surrounded. After a night so calm that he thought he was in a shepherd's hut, suddenly up on the left they saw a Hungarian battalion rushing down on them crying: "*Viliacchi taliani arrendatevi*"; down came a storm of bombs, there was a furious *mêlée* in the communication trenches and round our two machine-guns till they were smashed by bombs; and he, Pretto, had seen Captain Ripamonti wounded and unconscious on the back of an Alpino who was trying to save him, though wounded himself; he wanted to help him, but he saw two gigantic Hungarians upon him shouting, "Down on your knees, say your prayers," dead and wounded all around, and the position lost. Then, he said, "I stuck my bayonet in one of 'em's belly, and threw t'other down to Valsugana, and here I am."

We prepare to make a desperate defense at a few yards from the enemy. Suddenly, once more, all the batteries of Austria open on these shreds of companies—shrieks of wounded, and groans without end, without end.

We cannot move at all. A man's got to stay where he is and pray God a bullet or splinter won't find him. The whole rock-side is battered. The ground gives one the sensation of being struck by electric currents, it sizzles and crackles; and the man who moves may be struck paralyzed with his legs broken and his kidneys smashed.

The wail of the sergeant with the smashed kidney goes on monotonously, unchanging, till dawn.

A man arrives—he has slipped through that sizzling unhurt—and brings a note from Poli. Captain Ripamonti, with eight or ten holes in his body from a hand-grenade, had been dragged down from the summit by one of his men, then the man was smashed up by a shell, and Ripamonti, with another wound, was groaning down below, in the open. It was suicide to go and get him. But Sommacal said: "I must go and get my captain." So out he went, Piazza the stretcher-bearer following him, and the Austrians in surprise chivalrously left them alone. The captain must have been got in on his stretcher by now. That is what the lieutenant's note says: it also says that nobody will dislodge



them from where they are so long as there's an Alpino's feather left.

The runner is standing up, against the rock wall, his face cut by a scratch, his eyes hard and bright. Casagrande, the adjutant, whispers something to the major. And the major says:

"Alpino, you were reduced from corporal a month ago because you got stupidly drunk at Barricate and let your men eat their emergency rations. For four days, here on Ortigara, you have done well. Yesterday, you saved the mountain gun and encouraged your comrades. I promote you corporal on the field for war service."

The major clasps him by the hand. A lump comes into my throat, and I feel the beauty of that action, among us doomed men, caught in the grinding of the desperate battle. What does it matter if the bureaucracy delays its sanction for a year or refuses it? A thrill of heroism reanimates our will, the consciousness that every sacrifice is acceptable for an obscure moral beauty that stands above us and for which we can find no name. Higher than country, stronger than duty. Humanity, perhaps. We slaughter one another in a shambles which will disgust us tomorrow, for values which will seem insufficient or non-existent tomorrow. But we are men, with the dignity of men, and with this power of embodying in a gesture the justification and the reason of life.

The soldier's eyes grew a little dim and his mouth quivered at the corners: the other three or four lads—silent, glowing—thrill with approbation.

Nobody has any need for Unnia, Bontadini's batman, a silent and devoted Ligurian, just now. So he has got right down to the bottom of the hollow where three or four of us are gathered, on to a kind of second floor formed by a projection of the mountain-side, a crack in which one can only lie flat. But a heavy shell came and burst right on the roof of the grotto, which is not very thick; and the shock raised a dense cloud of dust. The explosion was so heavy that it boomed through our very vitals, so

imagine how Unnia felt it, with his head in contact with the roof of the cave. In fact, when the cloud of dust and the smell of the smoke had somewhat passed away, something else became diffused in the air, a kind of acrid gas which seemed to have nothing to do with that of the shell. We look at one another, surprised at first, and then with smiles; and Bontadini, unkindly, calls out: "Hi, Unnia, what are you doing up there?"

A painful pause; then comes the answer, feeble, a whisper from the lips only: "Oh, yes, sir, yes, sir."

At noon a short respite. The noble enemy gunners have gone to lunch. I take omens from the little pocket Dante which I always carry in the upper pocket of my tunic, in the hope that it will at least serve to stop a bullet. The fifth line on the left. "Your substance will remain with you." I communicate the happy omen, preening myself, to Casagrande; immediately afterwards, "Tata-tata!" The enemy's machine-guns are firing at this post too. Rapidly construct a sandbag shelter. A sense that they are gradually getting us in a trap.

At nightfall, orders to retire. Down the Agnelizza valley, between obscene, stinking corpses. A sense of liberation one cannot yet believe in—is it possible they won't observe us and leave us alone till the end?—and we get back to the lines.

The cup of warm soup and the kindly hut welcoming us again mark the term of a man's desire.

*June 30th.*

The extraordinary strangeness of being born again, the novelty of our sensations, as we sit in the sun at the door of the tent. Life is like something good that one nibbles in silence with healthy teeth. The dead are impatient companions who went off in a hurry on their own unknown business; but we feel the warm caress of life flowing over us. I sip from the cup of gentle home memories: the relief of being able to take this prodigal son home

once more to the poor old people down there, which one had not the courage to think of the day one went away.

It wouldn't be so bad if our life were always to be like this. Memories pile up: a year today, two years today, we were already in the war—this coming year we shall be in the thick of it again, for there isn't a trace of epilogue to the drama. But today one would accept it all, for this fullness of rebirth, for the mirage of a trip to Feltre or Bologna (this time, this time surely, she'll yield, the capricious little thing)—for the voluptuous gift of this sun which smooths out faces so long contracted.

But the generals whose plans went wrong, the supreme rulers who could not keep our conquests and gave incoherent or fatal orders, are blathering away now, picking holes in the dead and missing and defiling the fine deeds of heroism with bureaucratic slime. Meanwhile the staunch, torn, tired men are enjoying rest: fourteen hours' work a day digging the trenches which the supreme rulers did not think of having dug before.

Paper, paper, paper; blighting, burdensome, suffocating paper; reports, returns, and states. The battle is over, the pure hero comes back to the ranks and takes his turn for rations and pay with the funks. And adjutants, quartermasters, and corporals of accounts write, paragraph, re-copy, and tap the typewriter; the dead, missing, and wounded become mere numbers on the clean army forms; the captain who leapt up on to the height in the frenzy of attack has ink-stained fingers; the general who stood upright in the first line on the night of the twentieth and thwacked both Alpini and Austrians in the *mêlée*, keeping superbly up to his reputation as soldier and chief, is now losing his hair because a return is late, and calling his clerks and typists bad names. And the brave deeds of the men—Pretto, who took command of his section because the corporal was killed, and led it to the assault, and the next day climbed over the trench, went up to the mouth of the cave, and brought out, all by himself, fifty Austrians who surrendered (some men have had the gold medal for this), and

the last day of the battle escaped capture in a violent hand-to-hand struggle; Jardella and Forte, the runner, who tossed up to see whose turn it was to go back into the inferno, and did marvels for five days, unwearyingly, on the bursting, surging mountain; Piazza, the impassible and devoted stretcher-bearer, who carried half a company off the stricken field, and who laughs with his cheery laugh at any one who praises him, showing his baldness, which began in Lybia; Pesavento, who was killed the last night because he wanted to go back where his company was—their heroic deeds, registered, recounted, and annotated, confirmed by ten returns and a hundred reports, will they get them in a year's time the right to that scrap of blue ribbon which is bestowed with marvelous rapidity on the poet who does not need it?

But if the number of the dead appears in a clean return, they can peacefully rot on the flanks of the accursed mountain.

Thirty-six hours of short leave; just time to throw myself head-long into a motor-lorry at Cittadella, to beg the kind telephone clerk to put me through to Venice to give my father notice of my coming, and to turn up there to show him that I'm alive and well after having been at Ortigara myself, as I can tell him now.

"I understood from your postcards that you were at Ortigara," says my father.

"How, since I sent the usual postcard with 'nothing new'?"

"When you are in action," my father replies, "you always begin your postcards with the same formula, always with the words 'all well.' It is a habit you have got into without noticing it. But I noticed it."

We are talking now on the terrace of the hotel which has become the headquarters mess, looking out on the Grand Canal, which is basking like a tabby-cat in the sun.

"Still air, fine weather. Who knows if the Austrians will come back tonight to drop bombs on the hospital?"

I look with affectionate pride at my good father, as thin as I, as sunburnt as I, buttoned like me in his gray-green, which, at

the age of slippers and idle repose in front of the fire, consecrates him to all the discomforts and all the dangers. But I do not tell him my pride, because it was from him I got my surly, taciturn, reserved character. He, too, speaks to me seldom and simply, without affectation, almost with modesty; and every time I go back up there he clasps my hand without saying anything, as he would a colleague's.

But today my father gave himself away for a moment.

"You'll see, this war will last another two or three years," I said to him at table today, made jaunty by the pleasant weather and the good wine.

"If the war lasts another two years," my father answered, looking me in the eye, "I shall be dead first. This daily anxiety will end by killing me."

He gave himself away, poor man; he who has a son up there, and every day has to examine dozens of appeals from hearty young men, the flower of our race, the hope of the country, who implore to be kept away from the front line because their nerves or their hearts won't stand it.

Not a day of rest for these beetlecrushers of mine, not a day in a village with real brick houses, inns, and women. They graft a few feeble compliments on them, and then into the line with them again on another front.

But this line is so ridiculous that if the enemy pumps ship he does it on our heads. One gets a stiff neck trying to see what he is doing, and for shooting at him the loopholes are like anti-aircraft ones. You are not sure of being unseen even when you walk close up to the parapet; and there is always a bullet from God knows where that falls in front of your feet regretting that it was an "over."

Our predecessors were nice fellows. They left us trenches in such a state that when it rains the sandbags collapse (there is snow in them!), the props are giving way, we are left without



cover, and one has to put one's hope in the kind hearts of the Bosnians that they won't fire at us.

Everybody knows we can't hold this line, and that it has already been decided we are to abandon it in a month. But we've got to work furiously on it all the same. Here and—when we go back to the second line—on the second line that will become the first. At night, alarms, shouldering of rifles, wearisome sentry-go, patrols, always somebody wounded—by day work with pick and boring-bar, and fatigues and making concertina-wire, and again somebody wounded. The superior officer who is to be confirmed in his command on the first of September and who will have to show works beautifully finished on that day comes up. He is testy and ill-tempered; he comes up with a hundred days' confinement<sup>1</sup> in his pocket, and doesn't go down again till he has distributed them all. He hauls up the man who is asleep because he was up all night; he measures, discusses, and whittles down the hours of legitimate sleep. He says: "The men must work till they fall exhausted," and he departs threatening these Alpini who are only bluffers, and then, teuf-teuf! the motor takes him back to his headquarters, where a captain will write out for him a fair copy of the reasons for his punishments.

But the evenings when the usual enemy deserter, to ingratiate himself with his new master, romances about an attack to be made that night, and the alarm runs from the neurasthenic division along the telephone wires to battalion headquarters, and we are ordered to redouble our vigilance, and report every two hours, and every rifle-shot provokes terror down below, and the staff officer on duty glues himself to the telephone and asks what is happening (and we know quite well that these are the nights when we could quite well take off our boots)—then, because

<sup>1</sup> The punishments in the Italian Army are, for officers, simple or rigorous arrest, for the men simple or rigorous confinement (*prigione*). At the front only the rigorous categories (*rigore*) were in force, and resolved themselves practically into a loss of pay for the number of days of punishment. Since the Alpino soldiers sent their pay home, their officers preferred to give them a sound kick behind instead, and the men, so the author informs me, preferred this sort of punishment, too.

they are afraid of losing the position, they send to say to the gallant Alpini that they have perfect confidence in the gallant Alpini, and that there is nothing to fear with the gallant Alpini there, and that if they recommend the gallant Alpini to be on their guard they know this is a piece of supererogation for the gallant Alpini, but they do it to please the Corps.

So be it.

Two *carabinieri* brought up from Enego tonight the two Alpini condemned to be shot because one day on Ortigara, having left the battle on fatigue duty, they did not come back. The adjutant has to perform the most odious tasks, to inform the two men that the hopes they have tremblingly carried with them all the way are vain (the *carabinieri*, excellent fellows, had not the heart to disillusion them), to send for priest and doctor, to call out the firing-party, and meanwhile to have these two doomed men, so different from those we fling out of the trenches on days of battle, shut up in a hut—and as soon as they found themselves back in their battalion they shrieked and cried and called on their distant families, imploring for pity and pardon.

"We'll go on patrol every night, sir." And when they understood that no human power could give them back their lives, they did not say another word, but went on weeping painfully.

The firing-party falls in, horrified, looking with expressionless eyes at the adjutant, who, in a voice that he tries to make gruff, explains the necessity of aiming well to shorten the agony of men irremediably condemned. In the firing party there are friends, fellow-villagers, perhaps even relations, of the condemned men. Low comments in the ranks. "Silence!" cries the adjutant.

The priest has arrived, all trembling and frightened; and the doctor too. We march to a sinister little clearing in the wood, in the first faint light of dawn. Here is the first culprit. A sobbing without tears, almost a death-rattle, is issuing from his convulsed throat. Not a word. Eyes with no expression left, on his face only the dull terror of a beast in a slaughter-house. When led up to a



MEN OF A SKI COMPANY



THE AUTHOR (1916)



THE AUTHOR AND DR. DOGLIOTTI DURING A  
PAUSE ON ORTIGARA



tree, his legs will no longer support him, he collapses: he has to be tied to the trunk with telephone wire. The priest, livid, embraces him. Meanwhile, the firing-party has drawn up in two ranks: the front rank is to fire. The adjutant has explained: "I shall make a sign with my hand, then fire."

He gives the sign. The men look at the officer, then at the condemned man with bandaged eyes, and do not fire. Another sign. The men do not fire. The lieutenant claps his hands nervously. They fire. The body, riddled by the volley, bends and slips down the tree-trunk a little, half the head blown away. With one glance the doctor gets over the formality of certifying.

It is the second man's turn. He comes down calm, almost smiling, with a wreath that has been blessed round his neck. He says as though in an ecstasy: "It's just. Mind you aim straight, and don't go doing like I done."

The second rank are to fire this time, but the men try to get out of it, saying that they had fired the first time. The adjutant cuts them short, and threatens them with angry words. The party re-forms. A sign. A volley. All is over.

The firing-party—pain and horror on all faces—breaks its ranks and comes back slowly. All day long there is a lot of talking in low voices in the huts, and great dismay all through the battalion.

The justice of men has been done. Questions and doubts come up in our reluctant minds, and we repel them with terror because they contaminate principles too high—principles which we accept with closed eyes as a faith, for fear of feeling our duty as soldiers made harder for us. Country, necessity, discipline. An article in the code, words whose meaning we never really knew, only an empty sound for us, *death by shooting*, there they are clear and comprehensive to our minds. But those gentlemen down at Enego—no, they did not come to see the words of their sentence filled with meaning. Commanders of heavy transport, camp commandants, colonels of the reserve, and officers of the *carabinieri*: they were the tribunal.

Rejected for incompetence. Only the man who has come alive out of the crushing-mill of battle, only the man who has crawled



forward to the attack and gone white with horror under the bombardment, and prayed for death in the night of battle, oppressed by cold and hunger—only he would be a competent judge; and perhaps he too would pronounce sentence of death, but with the knowledge of what it means. But not those men down there, whited sepulchers with temporary rank, nicely shaved, with clean sheets, and their war a memory of school manuals and an edition of the penal code annotated far from the agony of the front line.

And, with *my* tribunal, perhaps the man who said "*L'è justo*" would not have been shot.

The Alpini of the Val Dora battalion, who have come as reënforcements with the machine-gun section, are singing the song of Montenero. Who invented those rough words, who found that sorrowful rhythm? It is the finest military song born of the war, and is destined to become legendary, to be sung always, when the grandsons of these lads are recruits—who will get home in good time and marry their sweethearts. There is in it all the touchy *esprit de corps* of the mountain soldiers, rugged and obedient, who accept the war as a just and inevitable retribution.

*Spunta l'alba del sedici giugno  
comincia il fuoco l'artiglieria  
il terzo alpini è sulla via  
Montenero per conquistar.*

*Quando fummo a venti metri  
dal nemico ben trincerato  
un assalto disperato  
il nemico fu prigionier.*

*Montenero, Monterosso,  
traditor della patria mia  
ho lasciato la mamma mia  
per venirti a conquistar.*

(Dawn was pale on June the Sixteenth,  
When the guns began their firing;  
Onward go the Third Alpini  
Montenero's height to win.

When we saw their solid trenches  
We attacked at sixty paces  
And, with grim, determined faces,  
Captured all the foe within.

Montenero, blood-red mountain,  
Traitor to your native brothers,  
Who were torn from their old mothers  
Your perfidious heights to win.)

It must have been composed the very evening after the battle,  
under a sky as poor as today's, after the sergeant had struck off  
the roll the names of the dead and had had their packs brought  
into the store.

*E per venirti a conquistar  
abbiam perduto tanti compagni  
tutti giovani sui vent' anni  
la sua vita non torna più.*

(Your perfidious heights to conquer  
Many were the lads who perished,  
Fine young comrades whom we cherished,  
Who will ne'er see twenty-one.)

There, on an evening like this, with a song like that, one would  
like to be a child again and snuggle into mother's lap, so as not  
to hear the storm that is rumbling, flashing, and shaking the  
mountain, as fearsome in its pauses as in its onslaughts.

For a month they have made me take a cushey job. My God,  
yes, in the office of the Gruppo Alpino. Files all day, alarms at  
night because the officer on duty at divisional headquarters has  
got to justify his existence; unpopularity with my brother officers,

whom, in my turn, I have got to worry over the telephone ("But aren't you ever going to send those states, damn it!"); and eight hours' sleep in forty-eight, with a kindly look from the excellent Colonel Treboldi as the only reward.

But after a fortnight they change the commanding officer, and another comes who is not one of us beetlecrushers, and we can't get on with him. I fail to prepare the minutes in the way he wants. I have a revolutionary handwriting. I am too prone to take the side of my brother officers in the line. I say improper things at mess. "You are wanting in tact and taste," my superior officer repeats night and day, pleased with his phrase.

"I should like to know why they ever made that Monelli a lieutenant," he confides to the doctor.

"Well, you notice he has already been proposed for promotion to captain," answers Bianchetti, who is fond of polite irony.

Going towards divisional headquarters, I saw some lorries with their wheels white with dust. And suddenly how I longed for the sleepy plain, for hedges white with blossom, for the trill of grasshoppers, for the smell of hemp soaking in the ponds, for slices of watermelon in the shade of an awning all dirtied by flies! And these lines of Dante:

*Rimembriti di Pier da Medicina  
se mai torni a veder lo dolce piano  
che da Vercelli a Marcabò dichina . . .*

(Call to remembrance Pier da Medicina  
If e'er thou see again the lovely plain  
That from Vercelli slopes to Marcabò . . .—Longfellow.)  
DANTE, *Inferno*, xxviii. 73.

I know the sky of night by heart.

The springlike intoxication of wind after the snowstorm. Scavenger-clouds, in white, are cleaning the sky. The peaks are

new and polished. Today, at last, the dead of Ortigara have their snow-white tomb.

And, see, the airman goes up among the comic puffs of shrapnel and the black bursts of the shells (the Alpini call this black, brutal one the digger, *el zapator*), to drink the heady wine of this gay morning more freely than we. We envy him, stuck in our muddy trench.

The strange spectacle of snow at night, the embroidery made on the wire, the soft masking of the pines: old words and tunes, old scenes that bewitch my grumbling spirit with an ever-fresh beauty. This silent loveliness that takes new point from the trappings of war is yet ancient; and if my heart finds joy in it today, in the winters of peace I had already immersed myself in the majesty of the mountain at night and drunk from it a magic draught of health and pride (my dying youth, with what eyes shall I look on the winters of my old age?).

One gets accustomed even to war and to getting away from it, to distracting oneself with trifles from cowardly fears, and to being enthusiastic over heroic deeds. But officers by compulsion are now arriving, and when they report they say—they come from some compulsory course or other—as though to underline the fact that it is not their fault, that, so far as they were concerned, they would never have left their motor, their typewriter, or their store. In our neighborhood, however, they will either become assimilated or smashed up. Even you, my pretty young gentleman from the Po valley, who say to me ingenuously: “You know, I have never been in the mountains, but I chose the Alpini because they don’t go to the Carso,” you had better pray God that the days may not return when we have to throw in stout hearts and hard heads to stop a yawning gap in our front. Meanwhile tomorrow you shall climb me these crags, and we shall see what these men of Agordo, infallible and unsparing critics, will say of your wanting to come and command here only so as not to go to the Carso: they are men bound by their birth and their trade

to a soldier's destiny so severe, thrown into the scrimmage for the duration as they are without any choice of theirs, and yet so calm and sensible, that they only ask to have confidence in the officer who must lead them to their deaths.

And army forms become a habit in the heads of quartermasters and office-wallahs in His Majesty's Army. Now, after my month behind the front in the group headquarters, I get to my company here and find how useless were those fine circulars I issued. I don't see one in the neglected company office, where the clerk, with a picture-postcard of flowers and a woman, and an inscription "I love thee" in flourishes in front of him, is drowsing away over the ration-strength the contented boredom of an Alpino who before the war chopped down trees in the woods of Comèlico, and solemnly adds up the accounts in the ledger sheet all wrong (and I shall not be the man to notice it).

But at headquarters, circulars—little circulars, big circulars; states and returns (write in all the columns properly even if blank); all in triplicate; a multiplication of staff reports; a piling up of minutes, that only waste minutes, over a wrong formula, a witnessing omitted, or a signature of a *locum tenens* which is judged insufficient.

And you, poor Tonon, thought that by presenting the telegram with the news of your mother's serious illness you would be given leave! The file wandered from desk to shelves and back again for four days: at the end of the fourth day it came back full of endorsements, and with this strange, conclusive minute: "Since four days have now gone by since the date of the telegram, it is presumed that the mother of Private Tonon is either out of danger or dead: but in the latter case it must be shown that serious questions of inheritance are involved for Private Tonon; in either case, therefore, as the case stands, leave is not given." And poor Tonon, hitting in the boring-bar all the harder with his hammer, imagines that he has got the cast-iron head of the minute-writer under him.

And he says nothing, and tomorrow will go on patrol without another oath. But the major sends him with a mule to get wine



at Col San Martino, and if he wants to pay a flying visit to Agordo he has only got to be careful not to meet any *carabinieri*.

*Gnocchi* and *piccola all' ovo*.

*Piccola all' ovo* is that which, when made with more art, is called *zabaione*. The companies have this rule: that at any hour of the day or night any officer can come to any of the three messes and demand a *piccola all' ovo* from the cook. Wine separate. This rule is very popular with Casagrande, the chaplain, the sapper, and all battalion headquarters, because at the headquarters' mess the major has decreed that nobody shall drink more than a quarter of a liter of wine—a measured quarter, for he sent to buy the little bottles at Bassano. Old Gallina keeps the keys of the wine, and he is more inflexible than a door-bolt. So after dinner the subalterns slink quietly away, leave the major alone, and come down on our messes to take the supplement. However, one day when we were at rest the major went off on duty to Enego, and handed over command of the battalion to Busa. Then the jealously guarded cellar of the headquarters staff was opened with a bang. All the officers of the 300th, together with our guests of the Val Dora battalion and my subalterns as well, all in the narrow little headquarters hut, glasses full, toasts, wine on the office papers, wine in the horn of the gramophone. Gagliotti told the story of the Basseggio<sup>1</sup> company's march when half of them were tight and he worst of all, the chaplain of the Val Dora tried to steal planks for his hut, Vallina came up in terror to say the wine was finished, and Captain Agazzi of the white and blue machine-gunners<sup>2</sup> arrived with his tribute of bottles; in a corner of the hut, heedless of the din, the clerk was indefatigably pounding the typewriter by the light of a flickering candle.

The next night, as I was going to Busa's, who had invited me to a dish of *gnocchi*, I had a nasty shock. On the Campofilone

<sup>1</sup> The Basseggio company, so-called from the commander's name, was the first experimental company of Arditi.

<sup>2</sup> I.e. with white and blue collar-patch. They had St. Etienne machine-guns.

road a sudden crackling volley of machine-gun fire, bullets hitting the road within two paces of me, and a moment of mad funk, because it's all very well in the line, but to be resting and get a bullet from God knows where—that's a bit thick! Where am I to find a hole? The groups continue, and the bullets whistle, and strike so close to me that I feel the slightest movement will get me one. Finally I make up my mind. I jump into a field, a thirty yards' run, and, poof! what a narrow shave.

Such things happen in these lines where we are plumb underneath them, and when we go to rest we never go more than five hundred yards from the front line. Busa made me stand a bottle when he heard the story. My name goes to swell the red book, the book which records the number of bottles paid for, each with its jolly reason beside it; the whole history of the battalion contained in a jovial, Pantagruelic chronicle—the cadet's *faux pas* and the captain's arrests, the good fortune and the bad, the waiting for leave and the regret at having no more leave to expect for a while.

As it is already night the company has been sleeping for some time in the big hut, with the sound, untroubled sleep of troops at rest. We, the officers, are still at mess, with a little wine and *gnocchi*, but not so very much more luxurious. The men don't grudge us our wine, for they know that when they bring an order or have done their punishment there is always a glass for them. And then the captain who drinks wine remembers on Monday to have two hundred liters sent up from the Supply for the company, which would be forbidden by the strange rules that prevail down there where the shells don't come.

(But in what world are those gentlemen living? General Ferrari knew better, for last year, after a fortnight of Cauriòl, frost, cold rations, curses, and shells, he sent up—relief? No, not that, of course, but a liter of wine and a cup of cognac per head. The Alpini understood that that meant relief at the end of the war,

but they said: "All right, you tell the general that, if he sends up two liters of wine a week, we take our oaths to stay on Cauridl.")

And then even here we have to camouflage things: the transport officer every Monday requisitions 200 liters from the Supply for the company officers' mess. "Oh, well, of course, they're Alpini officers," grumbles the quartermaster down there. "But that's what I call drinking!"

This evening at dinner-time the officers of the 297th company, Cuneo battalion, telephoned to say they were not coming. The orderly sergeant, who had received the message, came to tell me. A brief consultation between myself and the subalterns, then orders to the sergeant to get any five men out of the hut, one per platoon and one from the section, on urgent duty.

"With arms?"

"Arms don't matter."

The orderly officer, without being seen, keeps an eye on things outside the hut. It is a serious business to wake those five men up—then a chorus of curses as they stumble about in the dark looking for their boots.

"With rifles?"

"No, without. Hurry up, you slacker."

"B—— it, why can't they let a man sleep!"

"Reconnoiterin', that's where you're goin'."

"Goin' to b—y! Reconnoiterin' without a rifle?"

Five minutes later the five Swiss, dazed and standing to attention, get their orders from the orderly officer: to empty a soup tureen full of *gnocchi* in the officers' kitchen—and there's cheese on it—to bring their own spoons, and then go to the captain to have a glass of wine. They come, in fact, very soon after (Bordoli says there is no need to wash the tureen) with shining eyes to drink the wine and express their joy. Tonon, a little man, with red hair and a pointed goatee: "It's the best day of all my life."

And De Malandrino, the Abruzzese of 1896, who has a wife and two sons at home, with an Arab's face ending in a short,

curly tuft, opens his mouth wide, showing a gleaming row of wolf's teeth, and says: "Signor Capitano, you must have guessed the hunger I had tonight!"

My company being shortest of men, the major fills it up with all the convicted men with suspended sentences they send to the battalion. Today one arrived who comes from the Feltre battalion, a fine type, a veteran of 1891, a picked skier, very loquacious and confiding. His crime? Desertion to the interior: in plain language, they had promised him leave if he went on patrol at a certain place, and to that place he went. The leave did not come, so he took it for himself. No good trying to persuade him he had done wrong. He looks at one with untroubled eyes and says: "I had right to the leave, sir, so I took it meself."

If one tells him it was the act of a bad soldier, "Me, b—— it?" he says, "who was always the first in all the patrols they put the Feltre and the Caimi on when we was in the Valsugana?"

But he got four years all the same. I took him without being alarmed, as I took the others, all convicted for more or less the same offenses: they ran off to see their wife "who was going to drop her pack," to have a baby, that is; or when tight they said "aeroplane" to a *carabiniere*,<sup>1</sup> or they didn't return immediately their leave ran out because, as Palucci used to relate last year on the Regana, when he was barber of the 265th, "there was my old mother to find a house for, seeing as me father is dead, and so I'm glad it's me as is head of the family, but she can't get on with that bitch of a sister-in-law of mine, and so I had to make peace between them women before coming away; so I went to the mayor to get me leave extended and nothing doin', and I went to the marshal of the *carabinieri* and nothin' doin', so I extended it for meself." And after the moment of meditation that ends his long story Palucci adds: "But if you needed me, sir, you only

<sup>1</sup> The *carabinieri*, who are policemen, wear cocked hats, of which Italians always make fun. "Aeroplane in sight!" was a soldier's joke of this war, but it was a punishable offense.

needed to send me a telegram to come at once and I'd ha' come at once."

Now, in a case like this, if nobody else had found it out, the major would have roared a few curses at him, and given him a kick in the backside, and all would have been ended. But they surprised the man in the train, or at the rest camp, or they got a charge from the *carabinieri*, and so he was convicted.

Yes, they are bad, undisciplined soldiers. But what can you do to them when on the day of trial they are there ready to give up their lives with fine simplicity? Sergeant Pianezze of the Cismon battalion, in July, 1916, got together six or seven discontented scouts—here again leave promised and not given—and they all went off home, Lamon, Arsié, and Fonzano. But first of all there was the story of the case of bottles belonging to the mess of an infantry battalion which had been put into their hut with other infantrymen and men on sentry duty; these rascals secretly emptied the case, put .75 shell-cases in place of the bottles, shut it up again, and nobody noticed. They stayed at home, three, four, five days, and came back again bright as buttons. Pianezze lost his stripes, but asked, and got leave, to stay with the scouts. On Cauriòl, on October 19th, he was magnificent. A wound in the forehead did not stop him; he carried his comrades on as though he were still a sergeant, and came in at night after the fight, full of ardor, in an awful mess, and his face covered with blood, saying: "I'm sorry, sir, we copped so few of those muckers!" And if they gave it him, and if it comes before he gets done in, he will have the silver medal.

So with these convicts, with these bad soldiers, I stiffen my company of good little boys.

The autumn has already woven a web of mist among the trees. And a little demon dressed in gray dances at nights disconnected dances in my rather weary brain. Fall in the sick! But, to tell the truth, a little hospital would do me good. A white bed with sheets turned back, to go out a convalescent in the gentle sun of



the plain, and to bend from the steep bank over the slow, green stream that draws me to it in my dreams with such a swooning ecstasy.

The commanding officer has come to inspect my line and has put me under arrest. Amen. This is the result of getting into his bad books, and, if it were not for the few shillings of indemnity I lose by it, my hardened conscience wouldn't mind at all. He says: "You must get on with making the dugouts for the winter. Send to get planks, but, mind you, there are very few, and see the huts are strongly supported, but, remember, you mustn't cut down trees. And make caves, but mind you I haven't any gelatine." Yes, he might as well say: "There's a hole; make me a toad-in-the-hole."

I send to get planks at the headquarters store; they give me ten, and if I hadn't been able to steal thirty by unbuilding every night the huts which the Engineers are building by day on the Pagerlok road (a labor of Penelope) I should be in a hole. As for tree-trunks, I send a patrol outside the wire, and so we also clear the field of fire. One must strip the trunk quickly though, so that, if the C.O. sees it, I may be able to tell him it is an old one, found there. (And what does he think we are going to strengthen the huts with?) But there aren't any nails. Not even at the division. They are fearfully scarce up here, so precious that in Busa's company they play at *morra* for ten points a nail.

We call in Da Sacco, the smith, to a consultation, a man with little twinkling eyes in a thin, brown face, who has been nineteen years at Salzburg, and never smiles. Da Sacco says: "I'll see about making some nails, if you'll get me some coal for the furnace."

"Have you a furnace?"

"Yes, sir" (pride in his eyes). "I *requisitioned* it from the infantry battalion when they were relieved. But coal, that's what I ain't got."

Coal? I write a chit for it. There isn't any, they answer. Then

negotiations with the men of the mechanical drill: I give them leave to have their boots mended by my bootmaker and to get a glass of wine from Vardoli, and they give me some coal. Shall we get those huts up, at last?

First, however, Da Sacco has to make himself a chisel and pliers, after which he begins to make nails, without heads, but it doesn't matter, they can be hammered just the same—like the generals (the Austrian ones, let us say). And it is a serious business to find any gelatine, for they give us cheddite—and very little of that—or that black powder which is n.b.g. It is curious to see a lieutenant with a packet of gelatine cartridges in his hand, deafened with promises to make him give up a few, as though he were carrying about the most precious of treasures.

Then, since there aren't enough planks, we decide to build walls. Here, again, they don't give us any lime; and we have to apply to the doctor, who gets it from the sanitary store on the plea that he uses it to disinfect the latrines.

And so the huts go up. Then the C.O. comes up to the line disgruntled, and wants racks—even racks!—for the rifles, and placards with the inscription "Latrines" and an Ariadne's thread to find our way at night. The C.O. tells people off right and left, and never thinks for a moment what we are up against here to build our home, when there is already a foot and a half of snow and frost goes round at night under the stiffened pines, nor how cleverly these fighting men turn themselves into builders, masons, and carpenters, and by what subterfuges they carry on, even reconnoitering to the bottom of the valley, within two paces of the Austrians, to take away the iron roofing from the old abandoned huts—and if the high command knew about it he would get it in the neck. He would, because their written order is necessary for going beyond the wire: and that is because, in their eyes, the wire is for preventing men who want to desert from deserting—not to stop the enemy coming in, as you and I thought.

And that is just the reason why the C.O. put me under arrest. For, when he saw in front of De Fanti's platoon one of those little gates that we make for going out on patrol half open, he

began kicking up a row that was simply inhuman. He sent the man in charge on the spot to prison, popped the lieutenant into arrest, and set off in search of the gentleman who was in command of the company—namely, myself. I heard him coming cursing along the communication trench, saying he would make the major take command of the position away from me, that I was a traitor to the country, that I wanted to give up the line to the enemy, and poor Italy, with that hole I had made in her side. And he had all this written by his bottlewasher in the punishment book, and he gave me ten days' rigorous arrest.

Merry workers, these men of mine: they only need to begin a job of work to fall in love with it, and they bring a serene logical perfection to everything. They plane the beams carefully and neatly square the stones, happy to come back to the tools of their civil employments, happy to show the captain that with one single stroke of the hammer properly aimed they can break a stone in two (they first give it some little pats all round and discuss it seriously together), happy with the planks which they saw themselves from the pine-trunk with elegant, hieratic motions, and which they pile in a pyramid near the hut.

Individuals, personalities who detach themselves singly from the gray mass of humanity; and it is horrible to think that a bullet will annihilate tomorrow so much simple wisdom, such a sound sense of life. Limana, the big, brown corporal-major, with a square beard and two gentle, kindly eyes, who throws trunks about as if they were twigs; Tiziano Centa, with the great reddish beard on the chubby face of a fifteen-year-old, who is proud of his reputation of being the strongest man in the company, and energetically lifts rocks as big as barrels; Costa, the scout, dry and rugged, who, having been docked of his pay for having lost his gas-mask, brought me ten of them in the evening scrounged from God knows where and asked if I were disposed to buy nine off him; De Riva, the charcoal-burner, who with a match and two postcards can make a fire in the dripping wood, while snow is falling, which does for the whole platoon; Tonon,

who makes the whole company shriek with laughing with the ridiculous stories he tells with the expression of a melancholy satyr, and who wants to go into the Arditi because "taking positions is the greatest fun there is, but holding them when taken is a grand passion."

Tonon has gone into his hole, a fox's hole which he is making by himself, with Semprebon, who holds the boring-bar for him.

"We'll make a bend in it later, another two yards in. Then we'll put a notice on top: 'Tonon made this cave.' And we'll play at *morra* down at the end of it by candlelight, for the shells won't get us there, for sure."

Other sections have made their dugouts here and there in the trenches, now winter is coming on—caves lined with planks, or huts with overhanging roofs sloping up against the communication trench—and they have made stoves with petrol-tins, and if rain comes in through the roof they put a mess-tin underneath. Anybody going round the trenches at night and listening at the doors hears simple, cheery conversations, harmless oaths, but no dismal forebodings and no grouching. And it may be an Abruzzese who can't read or write dictating a letter to his comrade who can write.

"Tell her she's a bitch. Yes, write it like that. And that she don't matter to me no more. And say, yes, say that she can take another lover if she likes, and—wait. I want to tell her everything, see?—say that she don't matter to me no more."

Nobody is outside but the sentries. Two hours on and two hours off, for we are short of men. The wood a snowy ambiguity, perfect stillness, the sense of a net of lurking danger which may close in at any moment. The night is lit by heedless stars over the silent waiting. Insomnia and wakefulness in the captain's hut and at battalion headquarters hut: hot coffee and toast are ready to comfort the officer on duty who has finished his round. In the little caves and huts few are sleeping. The man in charge of the post and his men talk together, round a fire of wood burning in petrol-tins; a sharp, stinging smoke, faces cut out harshly by

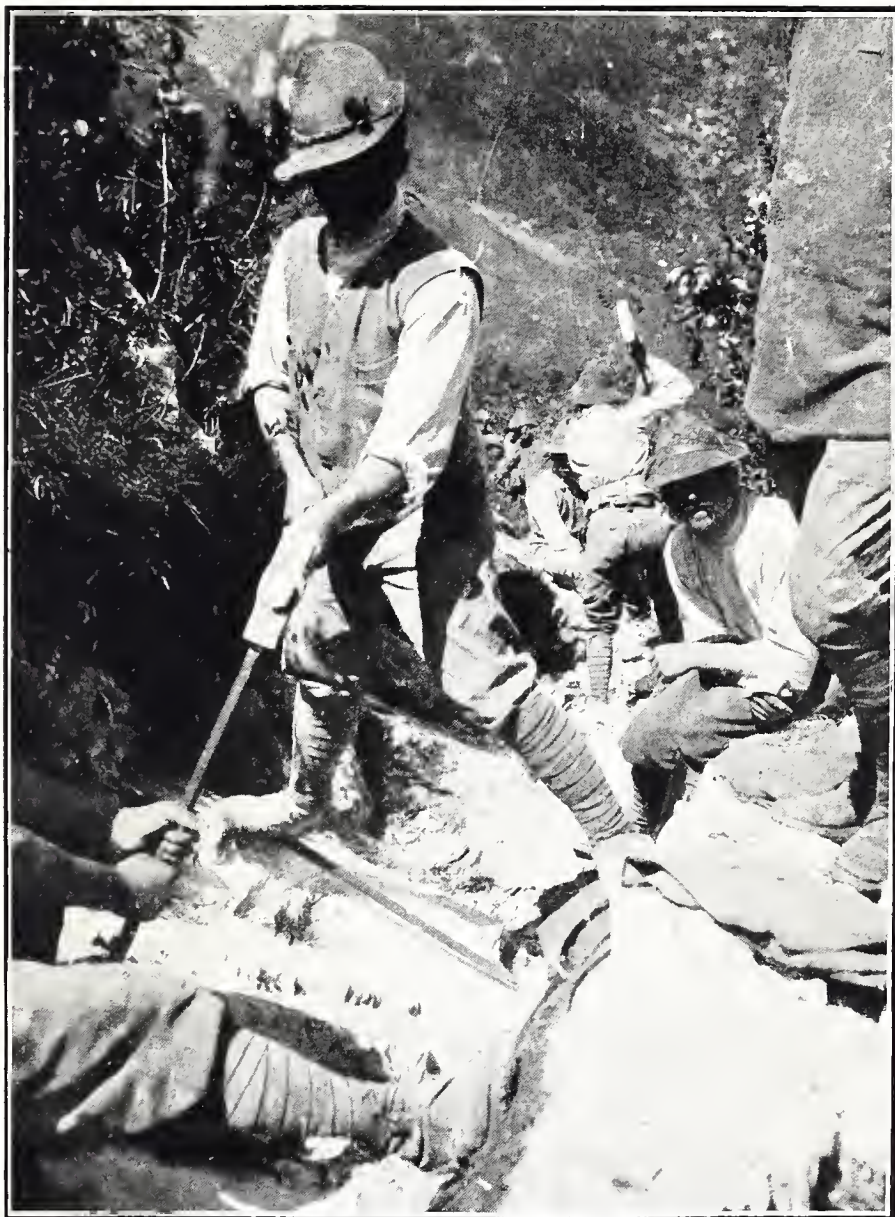
the flame, which makes enormous hollows round their eyes and deep slits of those mouths marked by curly mustaches. Nests of machine-guns and sleepless energy, should the enemy attack. But we well know that he isn't thinking of it.

When he is going to attack, we have an almost vulpine sense of it, which has come from long habit. But we laugh when the alarm comes from behind. Down there, at the hysterical headquarters, a little chatter of machine-guns or the bark of a few bombs is enough to put the wind-up. What is it? What is happening? They seize the telephone and bother your life out. Those things happen to men who haven't fought. If they had put up the wire with us and had tried to get through the wire opposite, if they had dug the trenches with us and prepared the posts, if they had got lousy with us, shivered with cold with us, and shuddered with us in the imminence of attack, they would know how things were. And they wouldn't ask us every night to redouble the vigilance, as though vigilance were a forage ration (and that they are cutting down, poor mules). But they have not been in the war, though they do command.

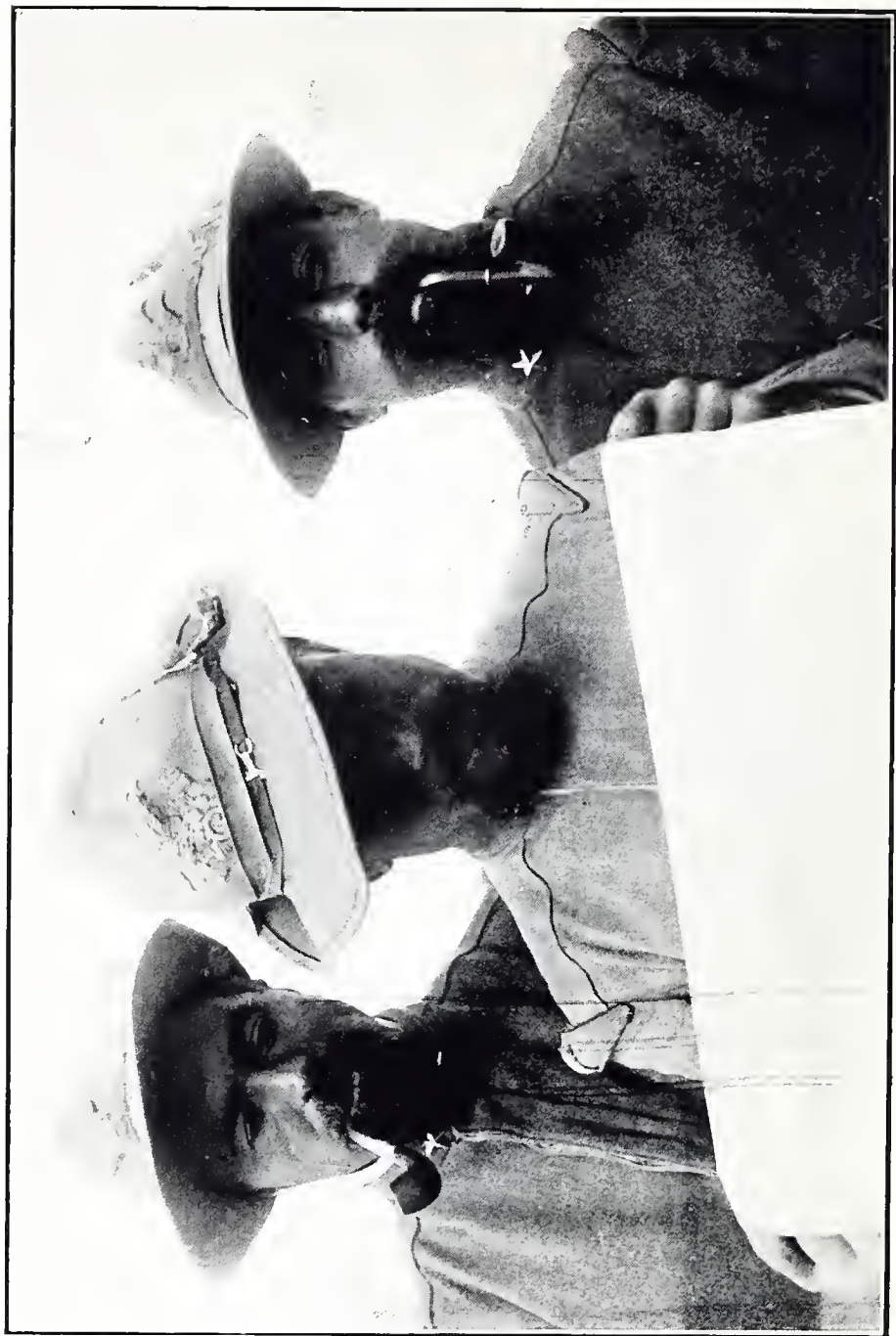
And De Fanti, with his little red beard, and his heart of gold, who has been a second-lieutenant for twenty months because he is always losing his papers and gets cursed by the colonel, who does not understand what capacity for heroism and what pride in self-sacrifice is hidden beneath the rough brusquerie of this man of Cadore—De Fanti says: "We shall win the war when the divisions are commanded by those who have commanded a platoon in war and know what it means."

One reads some funny things in the newspapers. Here's one. A deputy interrogates the Minister for War to know whether it is true that it is not possible for those newly called up to volunteer for one year: and the Minister hastens to set the questioner's mind at rest by saying that there will still be volunteers for one year, and, what is more important, in other arms besides the infantry. Another deputy breaks into recriminations in the





HITTING THE BORING-BAR WITH THE HAMMER



"One reads some funny things in the newspapers."  
(Men of the 265th Company, Alpini)

Chamber when he regrets the too rapid advancement of the officers of the combatant arms, especially in contrast with that of the officers of the Supply and Commissariat. Rather macabre of the honorable member, who ought to remember the joke of Trilussa's:<sup>1</sup> "Promotion is certain, I assure you—for I've eaten the captain!"

A third honorable member laments that the garrison of Ancona, in spite of the frequent attacks on it from air and sea, is not considered on active service, with all medals, pay, and allowances.

Come here, old veteran, who are today celebrating with Romanin your sixty months on end in the army, and if all goes well will be a lieutenant in another ten months, with two years of seniority in arrears, and let us draw our meditations from the bottom of the mess-tin, which the doctor has filled with good wine for us. The infantry soldier (and the Alpino is only a more obstinate and sturdy infantryman), tattered, lousy, dirty, stuck fast in earth and mud, which gets mixed up with the hard bread and cold rations that he munches, and when a shell comes has to rub his face in the muck to make himself small; who sleeps between an alarm and a kick, anyhow, clipped tightly by his accouterments, under a tent, exposed to the elements even when it rains or when, as now, October once more piles snow upon the ground—scrape away the snow if you want to make a bit of fire, and never-ending wet everywhere; who fights his best fight on the day of battle, yet is always engaged in that other hourly fight with rats, with insects, with frost, with the routine orders that forbid him to take off his clothes even when resting, with the store-clerk who cheats him of his wine, and with the post that loses his letters; the foot-soldier does not interest the honorable members "who spoke last." And those who are called up late deprecate the fate of being sent to join the ruddy infantry who are so prodigal of blood; and the man who has speculated on

<sup>1</sup> Trilussa is the *nom-de-guerre* of a well-known humorist and writer of comic verse.

the flight of the enemy aeroplanes from the flowery roof-terraces <sup>1</sup> (a book by Ezio Maria Gray has just come out which might be called the golden book of Italian skimshankers) wants to have his war pay and his ribbon on his breast too.

"Hell!" says Romanin, "life in the town is more costly than in the trenches."

"We are just pariahs," says the doctor, "who get kicked by those who ought to kiss our footsteps, and are cursed by the prophets."

And he thrusts under our noses the prophecy of Ezekiel, Cologne edition, *apud Naulaeum*, of 1679, which is the infantryman's curse: "Then I will leave thee upon the land, I will cast thee forth upon the open field, and will cause all the fowls of heaven to remain upon thee, and I will fill the beasts of the whole earth with thee. And I will lay thy flesh upon the mountains, and fill the valleys with thy height. I will also water with thy blood the land wherein thou swimdest; and the rivers shall be full of thee."

<sup>1</sup> *Altane*, roof-terraces, common in Venetia, and usually decorated with flowers in tubs.

### PART III

*La plupart râla dans les défilés nocturnes  
S'enivrant du bonheur de voir couler son sang,  
O Mort le seul baiser aux bouches taciturnes.*

—MALLARMÉ.





October 30th.

**T**RAGIC news comes from the eastern front. The enemy is trampling the soil of Italy; soldiers are throwing down their arms.

Here, nothing. A weary waiting made worse by office troubles, minutes, and routine orders, pedantries of neurasthenic commands, and ridiculous orders of superior officers whom we cannot respect.

We know nothing more of what is happening. No letters, no newspapers, no *communiqués* arrive, only confused rumors, either impossible ones of success or painful ones of defeat. Bridges destroyed behind us, every communication cut off, only ourselves and our rough job when the enemy presses on. The dark solitude of this snow is now all our world. But Busa's men, all of Friuli, and some of my officers—Romanin from Forni Avoltri, Scarpa from Udine, and De Fanti from Agordo—have no news whatsoever of their families; but my men, all from Cadore and Belluno, foresee the danger which is threatening their homes and gather together at night on the highest peak to strain their ears and hearts towards those distances.

*O tu stele, biele stele,  
va, palese il mio destin,  
va daùr di che' montagne,  
là ca l'è il mio curisin.*

(O thou star so brightly shining,  
Go and tell what fate befalls me,  
Go beyond the distant mountains,  
Where my little sweetheart calls me.)

Silence in the messes, recourse to cognac, but only to divert the mind, impressions of futility, of gloom, and of hopelessness—as when, on a winter's afternoon, having got up under the summit, I slipped on the smooth ice down to the bottom of the steep slope, and had to begin the climb all over again.

*November 9th.*

We have got to abandon without a fight these strong fortified lines, the posts, all our three months' work, and the huts in which we were tasting in anticipation the cotton-wool wrapping of the investing snow.

It is snowing tonight with infinite sadness, with no wind, on the line that has enwrapped itself in supreme beauty—for farewell. The men mount guard for the last time in silence. The night is already shot with sudden gleams—the usual fires of a retreat. Like last year.

*November 10th.*

The snow has stopped. All day long, in the desolate disorder of things left behind—a tortuous march—grumbling, we and the troops we pass beside, because nobody understands the abandonment of so much ground. The ear cocked, in vain, to catch something more than the rare shots of patrols—we retire upon positions more in rear, a steep line of hills without trenches. We camp at night amid the snow on the flanks of Mount Tondarecar.

*November 11th.*

At noon, tents are suddenly struck. It seems that the enemy has broken through lower down. Down you go, Alpini of the tragic hours, to stop the gap! Chuck away everything—cook-boxes, the planks you picked up, the third blanket—but buck up, buck up! Down headlong!

Good news below. The gap has been stopped by the Verona battalion: they lost all their officers, but they stopped it.

Muddy Foza. Where shall we sleep tonight? Meanwhile we all invade the supply store. If we have got to lose the place, let us take what we can before the enemy. I hide a little bag of sugar under my greatcoat, which will sweeten Bordoli's horrible coffee. And the men carry off tins of bully beef.

Fate is good. After an hour's march we get to a house and sit, with stone walls round us, in front of an enormous hearth on which is burning the log of Christmas stories. Good evening, gentlemen of the garrison battalion. You offer us hospitality, and we show you our cheerful faces of fighting men on a holiday.

We take sweet draughts of repose before the fire.

But at dusk an alarm. And I've got to say a few words to the boys too, seeing that we are going up into the mountain again. The infinite weariness, the dreadful waiting, and this inexorable sense of isolation have made us dream for so long of getting back at all costs to the houses and comforts of the plain! Is it not true, even though you are ashamed to confess it, that when you were plunging yesterday down the breakneck path you felt like hoping that that march was leading back to Bassano, as far as Cittadella, promised lands of wine and bright hearths, and that you did not bother your head with what a more extensive defeat might mean?

Weakness of a Johnny Raw. Let us abjure it aloud before this proud and tattered company drawn up at attention in the sop-ping meadow; two little dry sentences without rhetoric or illusions—our duty, our business; we are destined to lose our lives sooner or later; let us go up again, by God, and see that we save this fair Venetian country from those insolent foes in whose faces we slammed the door of our home last year. And if nobody says "thank you" when we come down again, still, the women will come to the cottage doors to kiss our hands. "God bless ye! It was you Alpini what saved us. Thank 'ee, and good luck to

'ee. Bless 'ee, like last year." Tomorrow we shall see them face to face, these Germans with the spike. That's nothing new, you know. We have known the Bavarians since 1915: and yesterday Lieutenant Scarpa, with the patrol, took two as a sample. They're just like the others, aren't they, boys? So right turn! Forward! Quick march!

A weary march in the snow. In the blizzard we reach the folds of Mount Tondarecar, and camp in snow and muck.

*November 13th.*

At dawn, orders to take the company into the line on Mount Tondarecar. The good old Sappers have begun to put up wire right on the crest of the mountain. Field of fire, nil. We shall have to do it again, I suppose. Doing and undoing, it's work just the same; but you shall do a bit of shooting with us if it's necessary. And it will be. For I have four men to every fifty yards.

In the livid light the mournful spectacle of the Alps which were ours and are now held by the enemy. But when they come up against our grief and our hate, they will not get through.

*November 15th.*

They did not get through.

*November 22nd.*

They did not get through today either. After a furious bombardment of our worse than sketchy lines, the enemy made another great effort, launching vigorous assaults in vain. Today again they have left dead upon dead—in the wood, in the open, among the stones, and against the wire.

The machine-guns swept the low trench on the hillock—but no sooner had the danger passed away than my obstinate Alpini popped up their heads looking for their mark. And De Fanti was afraid that some enemy had collected in the dead ground under



the wire, so he jumped out on foot between one burst of fire and another and threw hand-grenades—he hit them on the raw—on top of them, his beard flowing in the wind and heroic determination stamped on his face. The other night we heard the shrieks of the women of Enego, when the Austrians entered—and De Fanti is thinking of his mother and his sisters in the town of Cadore, and an inflexible desire for revenge is graven on his brow.

Alas! I'm afraid we shall get nothing to eat today, neither officers nor troops. Old Gallina has chucked away his ladle and fork and is up here doing a bit of shooting, and he rings the bell every time. And Ceschin has left the cooking-pots down below and has come to get a rifle, and when I express surprise at seeing him here, and praise him for it, he looks at me in astonishment, surprised at my surprise.

That is what it means to kill a man. It has taken two years of war for me to understand it, even after the battles, after so many patrols in the woods, when one fired at the living target which jumped from one trunk to another and one thought: "I'd better get one in before he does." It did not even seem that I had killed that man on Cauriòl, for whom we patiently waited in the sniper's post. He had to nip across quickly; he knew the danger perfectly well; he might have got through safely, and so much the worse for him if he took the risk. But the man today—that really *was* murder, and even in my old age I shall have a clear-cut remembrance of the man's leap as he was hit, and the collapse of the dead body, and the horror of it will stay in my memory.

I was looking out of the trench this morning from Soave's machine-gun post; and out there, a hundred yards off, black on the gray rock, I saw a motionless body which was not there yesterday.

"Soave, what's that thing there?"

"That's the Boche that Lieutenant Gagliotti potted yesterday morning, sir," a man put in.

"No, no," the sergeant corrected him immediately, "they took that 'un away when the mist was low. That fellow there weren't there yesterday."

I looked through my glasses. It certainly was an Austrian, and I saw him as close as though he were only ten yards off. Perhaps he had come up to the new lines at night, had lost his way, and gone to sleep on our side.

"Try and wake him up, Soave. You try too, Semprebon."

The two men take their rifles and aim. I go on looking through my glasses. It is just as we had thought. The two shots ring out, hit and rouse the sleeper. The wounded man shakes himself, jumps to his feet, and makes to throw himself behind a rock in safety. But another bullet gets him, knocks him down on the stones again, and nails him there; the body gives two or three shivers, then stays motionless for ever.

Yes, of course, it was the others who fired, and I who only looked through glasses. But I directed the fire, and I saw the man ten yards off in the field of my lenses. I was the slayer of that man.

Drafts come up to the line. For the general says: "You are solid troops, so you shall stay in the line a little longer. You shall have relief—in Italy, of course, with wine and women!—but later on."

And these recruits of 1899, with families that have been left over there, who shiver with cold at night because they have only one blanket (the second blanket and their new boots have been taken by the old 'uns, and they had to thank them for the honor), and who are always rushing out of their tents to take a run to get warm, these recruits are full of good will and have already had their baptism of blood, for while they were coming up in groups the enemy's artillery from Lissar opened on them.

But since there is a lieutenant-colonel who won't serve under another lieutenant-colonel—and then there's the fellow who

would be left without his temporary rank, and if he has his sector I want mine too—the groups are disorganized, then re-organized, the front is divided into sectors and sub-sectors, and they take our battalion and say: “Get out of here and go to another sector, or else we shall never make the sectors tally.” Amen. So the Bersaglieri relieve us, and we shall go into line beneath Castelgomberto.

Were you hoping to go and rest in Italy, you grouching Alpino? But that—so says the general—is the reward of the less solid brigades, which they fear would give way if they were left long in the line.

Is there still wine in the cask, still faith in the heart and strength in the legs? Then away with melancholy, boys! Your captain will tell you tonight how lovely was his fair-haired girl on a day in May.

Troglodytes' caves, dripping from the damp walls. Rheumatism. And the little demon dressed in gray is dancing in my tired brain.

Peace at last, after the drumming of the guns all day, and happy Porro, who has gone off to hospital wounded—for they won't catch him in the trap, as we fear they will us. In the evening sea of coral and violet the lost Alps are sinking, and the flaming Dolomites grow fainter. Upon Monte Grappa the flashes of the long bombardment acquire a starry brightness against the blue of the mountain, almost devoid of snow in this obstinate spring weather—an ally of the enemy's.

The exaltation of being a combatant in the advanced guard, always, in the most serious moments, has given way in me tonight to a rather heavy fatigue, compounded of forebodings,

of nostalgia, and of memories aroused without effort by the hour of violet and azure. For some time now I have lost that certainty of surviving. The war has been going on too long; too many have gone, and too many are going every day, along the darkling road of self-sacrifice. We go up and down forever, and in a continuous process we are caught in the mill and shot out again, only to be caught in it again later. Tonight, weariness and terror of this iron destiny have seized me; as though we were already dead, and were only lingering in this world in the hope of an impossible resurrection.

### Forebodings.

Captain Busa says: "Tomorrow the fellows on Tondarecar will lose it; I go to the counter-attack, I fire at them and the Germans, and I leave my bones there."

One of many forebodings—why go on thinking about them? And, with a rather weary smile on his thin face, scored by thirty months of war, he ladles wine out of the big soup-tureen on the ground, surrounded by his subalterns and by us, his guests, sitting crosslegged on fleabags. And he tells us of his little misadventures, underlining them with eloquent gestures, his gloom and presentiments already forgotten.

"Come here, Casagrande, and have a drink. Nane, take the guests' cup to the adjutant."

And Casagrande receives the guests' cup from the smiling Nane, a cup in which a recruity of 1899 would be drowned and in which a red sea of wine is rolling.

"They put over one o' they great big 'uns on me, yer see," Busa goes on, with a portentous richness of mimicry, "and one o' them splinters comes right into me tent. I'd got in the tent the stationery box, the telephone, and the keg o' wine. The stationery box wouldn't have been no loss, with all them files, but it lets it be, and it lets be the telephone, which does nothin' but bother me life out, and, God — it! the muckin' thing falls on the keg o' wine."

General consternation.

"But now I've had a tunnel made at the back, and I hides the wine at the end of the tunnel, and if the Boches want to get it they'll have to fire shells with a hook on the end of 'em what can work back'ards."

*December 4th.*

Alpini of Castelgomberto, we all know, don't we, that we repulsed the enemy who smashed our low trenches to bits with his guns and tried to surprise our sentry-posts. But the enemy has pierced our weaker flanks; the troops on our right are surrendering; we are enveloped and threatened on three sides.

It is the hour: the hour that I foresaw, though with reluctance, from my first day in the war. It seems as if all the past of struggle and pain and effort has concentrated with enormous violence into one definite and tragic moment, to live through which the whole of that past was only a necessary period of waiting.

It is the moment in which life is nothing; one forgets one's mother, and the face of a dead man comforts one's depression with promise of an equal peace. But the spurt of blood from the corporal-major's forehead, and the excited words of the subaltern with half his ear blown off, cut deep into one's perceptions with an intense clearness of vision, to be pigeon-holed for eternal memory.

Captain Busa is leaving with all the 300th to try and stop the gap.

And now they're on top of *me*.

What is the good of these guns here in the midst?

"Fire with open sights, open sights, lieutenant!"

The gunner-lieutenant looks at me stupidly, makes no answer, and then begins running like a madman in the direction of the enemy too.

"Let me do it, captain," his sergeant says. But the next moment I see that sergeant stretched stiff on the ground beside the



bloodstained wheels of his gun, and I hear somebody shout: "The breech-blocks! The breech-blocks!" And that gray thing which suddenly appears thirty yards off is the enemy, the enemy, and no good asking oneself how the devil they got on top of us like this, but a thing to hurl senseless imprecations at, and to empty the clips of one's pistol at without aiming.

Hand to hand. They come in waves. A desperate defense by the machine-guns. Are you dead too, old Altin? I envy you.

And now here I am, dazed, sweating, hoarse—God knows how I got here; was it in ten minutes or two hours?—giving elementary orders to the nearest men without being able to control the execution of them. Who is it I am cursing as I report to the major what has happened to my line and my company?

"Those cowards, those cowards"—and that's all I can say.

But my lads who have retired with me here, who obeyed me and who have saved their arms and their souls from defeat, are standing round me. Here we must stand fast, my lads.

We form the fixed line round Castalgomberto. They shall not get by this way again. There are Alpini feathers here, by God!

And the enemy gives way, content to let off his machine-guns at us.

Far away, in the wood, always growing weaker, we hear the shouts of "*Savoia!*" from the heroic 300th who are fighting the useless, unequal fight and are melting away. Suddenly Tarchetti arrives, the marvelous youth, and tells us that Busa is dead too, that serene hero, that merry companion of mine in eighteen months of war, stricken by a bullet in his forehead. I envy him tonight.

And in the midst of our great, painful dismay there is a rather humorous source of annoyance: the enemy is sitting down at our messes, that were all prepared, and is eating the rations ready for our men: we have to tighten our belts. But the rasher ones

who put their heads out of the caves are knocked flying by our accurate marksmanship.

The chilly night comes down, windy. Will the hoped-for counter-attack come? Meanwhile, without food, without blankets, without defenses, clinging tenaciously to the mountain, we await the enemy's advance.

*December 5th.*

All the enemy's night-attacks have been desperately repulsed. The men are hungry, and are freezing in the severity of the night, but so long as our numbed hands can hold a bayonet we shall strike.

A languid moon rises over the wood that swarms with dangers; groans of the wounded; a painful silence in the distance, from which we await in vain the shouts of the tide of battle turned. The patrols sent out to get in touch on the left do not return: there is enemy on that side too, enveloping us in every direction. From time to time, De Simone's trench-mortar bombs give a sinister bark in the wood. We have ten cases of them—ten cases we have to empty on the enemy, that the night may be one of agony and terror for him too.

With the dawn comes a shower of machine-gun fire upon us, and smoky-shells which sting the eyes and nostrils, and still the useless waiting. The dead subaltern is sleeping by my side, motionless and indifferent, and I envy that sleep of his, without end and no vision of the appalling collapse, for he died in the fury of counter-attack, when a certainty of victory stimulates acts of gallantry.

Hunger, and thirst, and the cold of night, which still imprisons our limbs.

But since we have had nothing to eat or drink for forty hours, and we have no more cartridges, and we are few, fate closes the act. The curtain falls.

Bitter tears, and a pang of agony so sharp that one feels that death itself will not blot it out. (My mother's face in the background of my most desperate decisions—and I fling my revolver down the precipice.) And I see the oldest of my Alpini, who survived with me the battles of Valsugana and Cauriòl, three winters of war, the butchery of Ortigara, all that were left from a long series of deaths in all these valleys and on those lost heights, weeping at the shame of capture. I don't know the name of the man beside me who says:

"What will my mother say!"

But I see his face, burnt by the hot breath of battle, glistening with tears.

Was it for this, brass hats, you took us from the mountain we could have defended, and threw us into this *cul de sac*?

Such is your reward, good Alpino. Not even thirty months of war give you the right to continue. And now you will die of hunger, condemned to work in the labor companies on the enemy's front.

A melancholy procession towards the enemy's back areas. Our frightful hunger beneficently overcomes our grief. In the dark they mix us with an enormous horde of other prisoners. How many among them held up their hands without fighting?

The animal necessities of food and rest overcome all sense of dignity; the men are already shaking off the burden of discipline, and venting on their officers their hatred, their rancor, and their satisfaction at being prisoners.

Half a tin of meat issued at midnight seems to be considered enough to last all tomorrow. The march goes on through the impoverished back areas: little squads of territorials, emaciated, gaunt, ragged—there are hunchbacks among them; there is a disgusting dwarf who shows all his teeth as he laughs at the spectacle we afford him—broken carts, corpses of mules, from which the starving soldiers steal a steak.

In front of the fountain, at Portule, a regular scramble; you get a man's fist in your stomach, and, if you try to tell him off, he answers that discipline was all very well over there; a shoving and pushing worthy of a slum crowd or a brothel: and, as we march, the fat Austrian goes cheerful and triumphant at the head of the formless mob of prisoners—torn uniforms without badges, bare heads because the helmet is too heavy, stars bartered for a slice of bread, marks of rank torn off in the moment of surrender.

Hunger. This morning, as we left, a handful of little biscuits and a cup of *Ersatz* coffee; at the rest camp—a melancholy meadow, huts among the thick trees, the chilly mist of evening trailing in from the obscure hills that frame the scene—a little rye broth and a ghost of a bit of bread.

We sleep in the lousy hut—then, next morning, a hungry dawn, and again the battered horde is on the march, poltroonery, impatience, all discipline gone; nothing but a longing for food and rest. At two in the afternoon we go in file, like beggars at the door of a convent, to get a little black, lukewarm water and a quarter of a loaf. The subaltern in front of you has the same rights as you, but he takes advantage of them, ostentatiously provokes you, and asks for the Austrian's approval, and the Austrian patronizingly intervenes to see fair play. The humiliation and shame are so great that one thinks of the dead up on the contested mountain with deep envy.

The usual sleeping-place at night at Caldonazzo: garish, freezing, lousy barrack-rooms—without food.

Hunger makes the eyes gleam, loosens tongues in incoherent speeches. Shut up in our dirty barrack, we wander about the yards in search of some unhopèd-for good luck: a watch bartered for half a loaf seems a gilt-edged bargain, and then recriminations because the trafficker has no more bread to give in exchange.

Then they give us coffee, and, later on, half a loaf of fetid black bread, which robs one instantaneously of all courage to eat it, when the first few mouthfuls have assuaged the pangs.

On the march again. The Austrians urge us to move quickly to reach Trent by daylight. The sooner you get there, the sooner you get food. But no, we will not undergo the shame of passing through the sacred city by day, the shame of displaying this appalling abjectness to the grief and horror of our brothers of Trent. We will enter in the dark, with arid eyes, in the hope of not seeing in the spectators' faces the reproof or the agonized question to which we could only answer with a sob. So we drag our tired legs along slowly, longing for darkness to come down quickly.

The mountains are already closing in; the night comes smoking up from the flanks of the hills and from the invisible river. Instinctively the whole formless column gets into order again, stops talking, and in the mournful silence there is only the crunch of the slow, regular march, as though we were following the hearse of a dead comrade. Gendarmes on horseback come to meet us, and place themselves at our head and on our flanks, prancing; searchlights play on the roads, whether to light us or to keep us under observation, we know not. Silent, in the silent city, we march up to the Castello.

There begins the rosary of days told with dull dejection, as we listen gloomily to the voices of our hunger and our memories. The jailer who hanged Battisti,<sup>1</sup> sinister with his bunch of keys, with a long black cloak lined with red, a round and contented belly—the dreary little yard, and the parcel of honey thrown over the wall by a brave lady (and, under the wall, a mob struggling in its greed for booty, like the angry scuffling of fowls in the pen when Bordoli threw them bits of meat)—a night journey in the train to the north, and always a changeless rhythm of hunger—arrival at Franzensfeste, a rather more comfortable hut; one can buy jam—faces that brighten with the foolish beatitude of men

<sup>1</sup> Socialist deputy for Trent in the Viennese Parliament. Volunteered for service in the Alpini, was captured in 1916, recognized by a spy, and hanged for high treason.



who prepare to enjoy being prisoners so long as they have their bellies full.

Henceforth no object for desire, no more gentle memories, but a level, comfortless sadness in the daily misery of a life that oscillates like a pendulum between two foci, hunger and boredom. And everywhere an upsetting of all values; no more trace of dignity in the men, from the officer who mounts a third star to do a lieutenant out of his mattress to the Russian prisoners who sell their bread and then go and rummage in the muck-heap and devour apple-skins and kitchen refuse. It appears that hunger justifies every meanness, and vileness is displayed with cynical ostentation, for it seems that an empty stomach has the right to prevail over nobility of conscience.

On December 20th we reach the castle of Salzburg—a grim barracks, with precipitous walls, on the top of a steep hill; without sun, we shudder with cold in the empty rooms. Into our hearts, out of the fog and snow, in the arctic winter weather, blows a host of sad memories at this return of the traditional feast of Christmas. But in the rhythm of boredom, exasperated by hunger, no sweetness knocks at the door of a heart enclosed in its own rancor.

But if I read the bulletins of our war in the translations of the German papers, the names of the surviving battalions, mentioned for their desperate defense of their country's soil, make my heart swell; those good Alpini, kept for the last good fortune, still clinging to the rock, still creeping to the attack, and free, free still, with the right to carry a rifle, and to the proud feeling of stemming the flood of invaders. But where are my own men, who were dragged off in a mixed caravan over another road? I know well. Their strong muscles and their tradition have marked them out to the enemy, who will have incorporated them in the tragic labor companies, to dig trenches and pull down huts under a brutal *Feldwebel*, with a quarter of a loaf and a handful of cold *Kraut* at night, poor lads—and to think that they used to

buy an extra portion of bread because their rations were not enough for them—until, after six months, exhausted, broken, and worn out, they will end in a hospital full of tuberculous Russians, from whom they will catch the same disease.

This dirty lot of officers who march by beneath your gentle eyes, perfumed with violet, maidens of Salzburg, have no thoughts of laying siege to your buttery hearts. The gentlemen are thinking of nothing but their hunger. From the river, which is carrying down whirlpools of icicles, there breathes a cold, wicked air that searches their empty stomachs. Lucky dogs, the lice, for they have always got us to feed on! But now they too are in for a bad time, for we are taken to be deloused outside the town; fetid huts, provoking Red Cross women, who measure our thinness with expert eyes. But when two Austrians put down in a corner of the yard a great pot containing the remains of their rations, we throw ourselves on that ignoble hogwash, fighting for it like pigs.

The cunning man who scuttled off to the kitchen and got the red-haired Red Cross woman to give him some white bread, after he had been properly washed, and with a merry conscience at the success of this little adventure, began singing one of Petrolini's silly songs on the way back—in a low voice, but clear enough in the silence of the frost-stilled suburbs. The officer of the escort wags his head in accompaniment to the rhythm. The few passers-by stop and look:

*"Die Italiener."*

I can see their thoughts: macaroni, Raphael, mandoline, Bersaglieri, plumes, Caporetto. Let them think, Casagrande. Besides, what is our country to us now except hatred for these jailers, and the shame of having to bend our backs to bear them? And don't let's look too long at those clouds, so rosily sporting over the face of the mountains, and high enough to see our own mountains, down there.

Even escaping was no good, though the enterprise began under the good auspices of romanticism and 1848: letting oneself down by sheets knotted together, on New Year's night, from the precipitous walls of the castle—moon's pallor on the frozen wood, intoxication of filling one's lungs with ice-cold air one hadn't got to fight for, beside the whirling river.

Then they got us hidden in a railway truck, the fault of a zealous employee. On our return handcuffed, hemmed in by bayonets, we find a terrified welcome awaiting us on the part of the officers and their crew. The adjutant is brutal and violent. Prison for these rebels, the worst one, stinking, no stove lit, a blithering wind from the broken panes, thin, lousy blankets, a bucket in the corner of the room for our latrine. Then two turns of the key in the lock: and a sentry watches us through the grating.

Assemblies of lice upon our bodies; in the morning, when we awake all filthy from sleeping on these boards, we go a-hunting, and show one another the biggest in turn. My companions have diarrhoea; but the jailer only empties the bucket in the evening. A heavy, fetid atmosphere, unbearable constriction; and from the window, covered by bars and iron netting, only a rag of dirty sky unraveling into snow.

The Tyrolese territorial, with the eternal pipe that dangles from his black beard to his navel, looked with pity tonight at my hands, swollen with chilblains; took me out and brought me furtively into the warm, light, cozy kitchen; and made the cook give me a cup of boiling soup, murmuring kind words in his funny dialect.

Nothing but such news could have diverted the exasperating course of our thoughts—hunger plus sloth plus anguish—which makes the faces of my two remaining comrades (two have gone to hospital) into death-masks. God knows what mine looks like. But when the Austrian colonel told us that our major, who was taken prisoner with us and defended by us, had been allowed

to keep his sword, even in prison, because of the gallant defense of his battalion, our battalion, and mumbles a few syllables of congratulation—"Alpini, ja, tapfere Leute, bravi, bravi"—(he leaves us in here just the same), it seemed all at once as though the prison walls vanished into the air and there was still the smell and noise of battle round us, and we felt the intoxication of being free men in a fight, with still the possibility of choosing and deciding, and round us the happy dead struck down in the hope of victory.

Gagliotti says: "Captain, if only we had some of our white wine of Col San Martino to drink to the news!"

But we have nothing. We will get the good jailer, the Tyrolese with the dangling pipe, to buy us ten kroners' worth of jam, and we'll drink water out of the pitcher; and the Austrian colonel must have understood the kind of men he had to do with, because he had a bit of straw thrown on the stove, which certainly makes an acrid smoke that catches our throats, but it gives out a little heat as well. They even brought us a lamp this evening. Joy!

And Gagliotti at the bottom of his cup of happiness finds the old songs of happier days, and jumps up on to the bench to sing them, as he jumped on top of the trench on November 15th to shout derision at the already faltering Alpenjäger—when he was the finest officer that ever wore the eagle's feather.

*Dove sei stato,  
mio bell Alpino,  
che ti ga'  
cangià'l colore . . . ? ,  
L'è stata l'aria  
dell' Ortigara  
che m'à fa'  
cangià'l colore. . . .*

(Where have you been,  
My fine Alpino,  
That has made you  
Change your color?)

It was the air  
Of Ortigara  
That has made me  
Change my color.)

Bright lines that very gradually disarrange themselves cruelly and turn into horrible shapes. A whole family of stupid thoughts born from an absurd father-thought. The past is too beautiful to believe that I lived in it; the future is too beautiful to hope to live in; and this present is an agony of regret for the past or of expectation of the future. Ancient knowledge. What new words can you find to say? I live forever in a single moment, always the same, which transforms itself in the reflection of the mutable appearances that pass before it. Therefore is life so short. Before me, chained to the present as a paralytic to his armchair, before my motionless self there passes a cinematograph of aspects, and I call it my life. Meanwhile gray hairs appear, and I am already turning backwards—desperately—to recall my lovely youth. Another film, gentlemen. Comic; a perfect scream. But my youth? Already shown, gentlemen. A new program tomorrow.

A deep and desperate love of my country felt in all its strength for the first time here in compulsory exile.

The west wind dissolves the snows; the canals glitter in the spring light in the valley already green and raw; the smell of the soil steams up from the bottom of our gloomy dwelling. The sun and this renewal of the season bring out green mold on the bishops' arms over the arches under which we drag out our boredom and our fancies of far away.

The color of her eyes on an April morning; the hut behind the guarded trench; to walk the pavements of Bologna with polished boots; tea in the unknown little café in the unknown city, with disconcerting lady friends—"*Ich glaube, Vaterlandsliebe nennt man dieses törichte Sehnen*"<sup>1</sup> ("I suppose this foolish longing is what people call love of country").

<sup>1</sup> A quotation from Heine, *Deutschland*.



I must try to escape again.

"Long is the way, but love is strong."<sup>1</sup>

At night, down over the walls, down the steep hill, the wire passed; in the light of the moon, free once more, making for my country.

And though, after these days of liberty, I was caught, handcuffed, searched, and changed from jail to jail till I reached my old prison at Salzburg, what a fresh breath of freedom I carry in me, with which I slaked my thirsty lungs and senses in the nights of walking! In the white light of the moon, along the frozen roads, with here and there the murmur of invisible torrents buried in snow and the valley surmounted by the pure diadem of the high peaks, my legs had the lightness and briskness of a continuous intoxication. I drank the waters of the rivers. I slept by day snug in the dry leaves of shepherds' huts, in the hay of the Alps, sometimes shuddering as I heard the great hay-fork of a Tyrolese poking into it. Other nights I passed under an even, windless snowstorm, through silent towns, but from the lighted windows came a melancholy longing for my mother's home, for nights of tranquil wakefulness at home that clutched my heart till it ached. (Who will find that little figure of a girl who, that evening in San Giovanni in Pongau, showed me—rather timorously—the way?) Alone in the great hostile country, in rain and snow, with the proud sense of having to pass on like this, unknown to all; to spy at the level crossings, to go through gates and climb fences, a sad and stubborn vagabond.

And now, to contemplate one's navel of regrets, once more a prisoner.

The old castle shivers in the buffets of the spring wind; on the Bavarian Alps an azure warmth is pouring down from the sky, striped gold and sanguine. Fresh promises of spring at the doors of the prison, thrills of rejuvenation on the embattled towers and on the dark yard, from which the old trees, greedy for

<sup>1</sup> Quotation from *La Figlia di Iorio*, by D'Annunzio.

space, stretch out to us their lightest branches, slow in swelling their buds.

*"Li dà puntura d'amore facendogli venire àscaro della città sua, della casa, della famiglia e delli amici."*<sup>1</sup>

Departure from Salzburg threateningly guarded by three fixed bayonets. In the same carriage there are traveling—their musical cries and words reach my ear—charming lady friends of Austrian officers, of whom I caught a glimpse as I passed along the corridor.

The lake of Seekirchen—*"Sehr romantisch,"* pronounces the smelly sentry who is crushing me. A melancholy mirror under the ashen evening, a desert of banks and firs and wooden huts made for flirting with Gretchen: sentimental rubbish which takes hold of the senses as they strain towards that free solitude.

The train goes through dark woods. But at intervals a little lighted window, the compassionate eye of some low cottage, and those women's voices from the corridor, bring up a picture of the humble pleasantness of the domestic hearth, and of that jolly feeling of returning, to slack cozily in a corner of the house and not going out again, of lighting a good wood fire with slippers on in a kitchen of gleaming tiles (like that one I saw at the foot of the castle at Salzburg one foggy evening, and I thought that to go in and stay there at liberty would be the last word in happiness).

Braunau in Bohemia.

<sup>1</sup> "(The evening bell) gives him a prick of love, bringing to him a sharp longing for his native town, his home, his family, and his friends." These words of the fourteenth century, written by Buti, are a commentary on the famous lines in Dante, *Purg.*, viii. 1: "*Era già l'ora che volge il desio,*" etc.

"'Twas now the hour that turneth back desire  
In those who sail the sea, and melts the heart  
The day they've said to their sweet friends farewell,  
And the new pilgrim penetrates with love  
If he doth hear from far away a bell  
That seemeth to deplore the dying day."

(Longfellow.)

Snow and severe storms over this arctic steppe, shut in at the back by monotonous wooded hills in which my fellow-prisoners recognize the best-hated heights of the Carso.

Short commons; an unrelieved grumbling of hunger in the stomach; habituation to nasty food and stupid occupations.

My companions chatter of vain things, pour egoism out of their shabby hearts, and settle down to the narrowness of this life; they rejoice, and enthusiastically spread abroad any news of the enemy's progress that promises peace at last: with an abject desire for their country, which for them means victuals plus women plus the letting loose of their passions.

Food is the only thing we think about.

The man who ran away or put up his hands is a regular Ajax now, or else he supinely admires the foe, or else tells a rosary of disastrous prophecies. The lawyer works at boring through the wooden planks.

We wash our stockings; we darn them; there is a lousy line of rags across the room; one hasn't the courage to show certain shreds to the servant, and has to stay in bed waiting for the shirt to dry.

To feed the stoves they take the seats off the latrines and tear up the sidewalks of tree-trunks: the good Austrians repair them with new trunks.

And a slow rain, and the drifting of low clouds over the melancholy steppe: dead waters, deadly to us, deadly to our intelligence, to our will.

How often I go back on a pilgrimage over far-off days, and start with dismay at the shock of such trivial memories! The color of a sky, the smell of sand, the breath of wind; my mother, my father, my dead brother, corners of childhood far outside the deafening tumult, beyond the barrier of the dying war. It is as though this suffering had passed over me in vain, and had left me nothing but worn-out limbs and shaken nerves.

You have got white hair, old soldier of 1890, in this shame of huts enclosed by barbed wire and guarded by sentries who steal

the grass out of the moat for sheer hunger. I should be curious to know if you think of the rich library in your study when with selfish care, in spite of your kind heart, you arrange the little bags of rice and parcels of bread in your wardrobe. Today, when the slackness of afternoon is made worse by the sluggish warmth of spring, you ask yourself: "What shall I do to make the time pass more quickly?" And you propose to make a risotto.

You too are spoiled. These sleepless nights, haunted by thoughts of escape, hunger and nostalgia, stifled anger, the desolate discomfort, all leave indelible marks on our bodies, and ulcerate the original nobility of our strength. I am worried at hearing voices that I never wished to hear again; I pore apprehensively over new and eloquent symptoms. University memories: hebephrenia, katatonia, neurasthenia; confused thoughts panting by stages of insomnia through the long nights.

They change me to another camp again (this is called Hart, which means hard, and it is in the middle of Austria, and in the background there is a greenish-blue line of mountains fringed with the darker color of the woods, from which a smell of pastures comes to the mind, a thought of dawns seen from the refuge-huts, halting-places in wandering over the mountains of Italy), but the rhythm of bitterness, of hunger, of horror, of forced community, is not changed. The weather has changed. Already the sun is blazing on the baking huts, propitious conservatories for the flower of boredom. The wire, the countryside drowsing under the level sky, fug and discomfort in the buzzing huts, sweat of idleness, void in the heart and in the brain.

(Oh, but on my native sea red flapping sails, slow-moving boats that drink in the blue; fresh nakedness of the mountains shivering with merry streams!)

Today is like yesterday. Nothing changes. Today like yesterday, like tomorrow. Roll-call in the morning in the squalid rooms, inspection at night to see that all is dark in the cells: between these parentheses our useless life goes on, no longer

straining towards a future one hardly dared to scrutinize, monotonously dangling to and fro and clinging to changeless, exasperating memories.

A stamping and trampling up and down the endless passages of the conjoined huts, which get their light from skylights, and one sometimes gets the nightmare that we are already dead and buried, restless corpses who come out of their tombs to go and have a gossip with other dead men in the ambulatories. Hate for one's brother officers with whom the Austrians force one to be intimate; the fumes of fetid, mean humanity from five hundred prisoners, a hungry, selfish flock; twenty-year-old bodies condemned to idleness and masturbation. Nor do I feel myself any better than they, though I presumptuously shed a few grains of wisdom here and there, and though a red yesterday of combat still irradiates and consoles my humiliation of today.

I too have learned to play chess; I too sometimes hang about the wire fence breathing my desire on the women passing by; I too regretfully surrender my two pounds of rice to the common mess as a forced act of charity. And perhaps I shall even go and borrow that pornographic book from a brother officer.

Transferred again—but this hotel high up in the mountains which is to be our home, though it is still prison, with walks forbidden and a wire fence round it, opens to the view a tranquil landscape of hills, meadows, and woods: and a gay bevy of dirty little maids with waggling hips and a solid young hostess revive our deadened instincts.

Here, at least, some lovely skies enliven our seclusion; evenings that breathed their last in clouds of fire, shivered above the arch of the woods in flakes of cardinal's purple, and flickered out in a violet veil at the end of the valley.

Evenings after a storm that broke the western sky, and a watery green came over the peaks, the meadows, and the transparent distances, invaded the rooms, and flowed over the stormy



sky (at this hour, under a similar sky, Bologna would be glowing dolomitically in its towers deep embedded in the darkness of the sky)—and lazy little heaps of clouds (like resigned prisoners) in the furrows of the lateral valleys. Longing to walk at liberty through woods and meadows towards our heart's magnetic desire.

Evenings of level gold on the highest peaks, while tempestuous clouds rode over the high heavens, whose fresh wounds ran with living purple. Then that gold became a gleam of copper veined with yellow—dusks of war upon the Alps of Fiemme. And the pond far down the now dun-colored valley was a bright eye fixed on that festival of the skies to which the free and happy clouds were hurrying from the morning.

Nothing but colors of clouds and the echo of doleful bells—nothing else in this fitful chronicle of sensations. And what else? Brother officers who blather about the parcels of food that don't come, or behind their wire cage moan out their useless youth to the women that pass by (the cavalry captain's wife, fair, provoking in her gayly colored clothes, her eyes on the hunt; the towsled milkmaid, greasy and smoke-stained, busty and broad-hipped)? The echo of humors that hardly reach us, because we are even forbidden to read the papers, and speak of war and revolution? The echo dies dully away upon this baleful strand.

Brother officers have made being prisoners a subject of vanity. They swank about their seniority in prison. They debate the virtues of the ideal prisoner. They buck about the legal status of prisoners, with instances from the camps they have been in, about their commanding officers, Austrian or Italian, or about Byzantine questions of the mess-table—whether salami sausages shrink through evaporation of the surface, how far jam dries up, if the man who gets no food-parcels can get some from the man who has too many. They make sitting-rooms or mountebanks' dressing-rooms of their cells (this depends on each man's taste: oh, horrible little rooms decorated with festoons of colored

paper and rosettes of picture post-cards!) with a care that reveals a disgusting affection for this forced abode, and they have endless futilities and knick-knacks sent from Italy, and there is no longing for liberty or country on their lips except it takes the expression of a desire for luxurious food.

And when they get back they will ask for a distinction to be given to prisoners of war.

Don't be unjust (do not you sometimes burn to be free for the fullness of love which her pandering post-cards promise?). There are the pure, the indignant the furious. There are those who fell into the enemy's hands simply because death is not a necessary third stage after holocaust and hunger, because they remained at their posts when everything collapsed around them, and it served them nothing to roll rocks down on the enemy when their ammunition was exhausted, it served them nothing that they retired over the rugged crests of the mountains fighting useless, obscure fights for days and nights (and here let my *esprit de corps* record the proud battalions of the 2nd Alpini who defended Rombon, for whom these words of Mallarmé might well have been written):

*"La plupart râla dans les défilés nocturnes  
S'enivrant du bonheur de voir couler son sang,  
O Mort le seul baiser aux bouches taciturnes."*

—until, not the enemy, but hunger and the bullets that spared them consigned them to unequaled torture, or their wound paralyzed them on the lost roads, or their revolver failed at that last shot which was to annihilate their life in the supreme sacrifice. Now, they are "taking a cure."

"Taking a cure" means fasting voluntarily, or irritating your wounds, or taking to bed for three months to simulate sciatica, or playing odd antics to pretend madness, or inoculating yourself with strong doses of poison, or snuffing up sulphur, or chewing coffee—so as to reduce your body to a sufficiently bad state for the doctors to pronounce you an invalid, and so you get

back to Italy; but it is done so that the sun of Italy and the food of Italy may soon wipe out these sham traces of disease, and you may go back again to the battalion, by God, where life is good and risking one's life is divine, where one is a man and not a caged animal, and where we shall exalt this violent love of country which seems now born for the first time here in the foreign land, aroused by our impotence, our rancor, and our hate.

It appears that there are some privileged prisoners who live in a princely castle, take tea at the baroness's, and dull the ache of waiting in soft ease. This is told in a low voice in the little knots of gossipers, with that malevolent envy, with that ever-ready harshness and impatience that colors our talk.

And if anybody speaks of the past, you feel that he is already beginning to invent legends—he who was a true, good fighter—which will give such a false picture of the war afterwards.

“Ah, that day when we were standing at the mouth of the cave and that shell fell five yards off, do you remember?”

“*When?*” says the other, astonished.

When the enemy chivalrously renders the honors which he conceded to our leader, I think of the rotting dead who were the greatest glory of our action. But they are vain shadows, the dead, and so are those other living men who suffered with us that unhappy vigil, men and corporals, and who are beginning to fetch up, wasted and spent, at some hospital for dying men (I heard that two arrived at the Russian hospital at Hart, two months ago).

The song of Montenero ends like this:

*Il colonello che piangeva  
a veder tanto macello:  
fatti coraggio, alpino bello,  
che l'onore sara per te.*

(When he saw the awful slaughter,  
Colonel, he began to bellow.

Come, buck up, my noble fellow,  
All the glory'll be for *you*.)

Another departure. If the serene view of the mountains here sometimes softened our anguish, it will pierce our hearts again more sharply tomorrow when we leave, traveling under an escort of bayonets, slaves under the curious eyes of the enemy—a hungry, ragged, defeated enemy, it's true—but free.

On reaching Sigmundsherberg one is stifled by a waft of nastiness, nausea, and constriction which emanates from the endless, reeking corridors, from the crowd of prisoners, and from the unceasing trampling of a flock that is set on procuring food and comforts to ease its poor empty life. And one cannot guess who are the pure, the indignant, and the furious in the squalid crowd that swarms in the barrack.

My neighbor tinkles out comic-opera tunes, popular songs, and airs that charm the Sunday crowd wedged together eating ices in a dusty piazza, monotonously hour after hour on the guitar. I can't see his face through the wall, but I can see his exasperated prisoner's heart. The gray sky, the houses that fade into the mist, the sentry behind the wire fence, are not so sad as that scraping of strings. Waiting in front of a door under a fetid little colonnade. Afternoons in the brothel. Lottery numbers in a shop in the chattering suburbs. Filth of flies on stale sweets in a dark shop-window.

Shudders so profound are shaking the world that they even reach our prison: the yeast of revolution, suppressed in vain, is rising. A spasm of new life is knocking at our gates too, and makes us stretch out our hands neurasthenically in the impotence of our effort. But my neighbor and the hundred prisoners who are like him, give no other echo than a feverish thrumming of idiotic tunes.

But now, of all times, the dancing school has re-opened—the obscenity of swaying in exotic dances in tight khaki slacks. And

they have had a gala dance. It was a successful fancy dress dance—and what a pity we can't have another. Meanwhile the chronicles of bygone parties are remembered. Weren't you there? What a lot you lost! There were boys of the 1899 class dressed as women who carried on under the glistening eyes of their brother officers. There were scenes of jealousy and courtship. There were those who got a taste for being women, and sat all day by the window sewing themselves transparent trousseaux, and flirted with the cavaliers who contended for them. There was one who went to the Austrian headquarters to complain because his friend didn't love him any more. And in the evening, champagne and kisses. Indeed, you lost a lot!

"Aren't you coming? You're wrong. One must forget, sometimes."

Oh, yes. But I bought some Tokay and shut myself into my room with two silent friends, and at the bottom of the bottle we got back to our beetlecrushing war and our surly fighters' pride.

*November 1st.*

Freedom.

*November 2nd.*

Mist and gentle rain on All Souls' Day. But who is thinking of the dead today when the wire fence has been thrown down and the escort has fled and we have their arms?

An impression of having been diddled by this country in collapse, which, though tottering in its tracks, kept us shut up till yesterday—and yesterday morning there was a ballot to see who was to be transferred into another camp!

I don't know how my brother officers can drink in this unexpected freedom. Happy faces at being able to take a muddy



walk in the town and to cuddle a girl behind a hedge—an easy heroism to manage an escapade about the country which is crumbling like a sandbagged trench where the infantry have filled the sandbags with snow instead of earth. One man is buried, the rest are left unprotected, and the good Bosnian on the other side shouts: “Has anybody hurt themselves?”

But that is an old story. The war is over: and I shall not have been with the last battalions at the assault, to wander up the well-known roads, to retrace the road of captivity, and to ascend again the mountains of my watching and my faith.

Liberty is rather sad to me; a bitter feeling of regret is at the bottom of this enormous sense of relief.

Let us, then, put up some kind of pretense of reconquest, we an armed battalion in the heart of Austria, with arms taken from the enemy. Pickets and patrols, and regulations for internal routine and war duty; this resubmission to a discipline of our own does us good, and the ranks in close order jump to the present like a good spring that had been left idle. There is no armistice yet at the front; perhaps tomorrow—for what do we know of what is happening down there?—a stroke of fortune will buck the enemy up again, and then it will be a serious game for us.

A game; or an adventure. And one would almost wish the war to go on, and for us really to make that corsair raid which we are planning—to come down on Vienna, twenty thousand stout Italians, six hundred rifles, and machine-guns, with the certainty of finding on the way some military stores to pillage, to impose peace on the capital, to strike the enemy to the heart, and who knows what?

Since the other day, when our troops freed themselves from their escort, partly by peaceful means and partly by force, and came to open the door to us officers, and an Italian headquarters was installed instead of the Austrian, we have been living here at Sigmundsherberg in the maddest of situations. There is a

picket of ours, a non-commissioned officer and ten men, at the station; and the trains full of Hungarians being sent hurriedly to the Italian front get a dreadful wind-up at seeing these armed Italian soldiers. Some escape, some throw down their arms, some shoot; and then the stationmaster hastily gives the signal "line clear" and sends the trains on. The Austrian telephone clerks at the central post office have agreed to continue service for us, so long as we ensure them their food; and when, on the first, the sub-prefect of the neighboring town telephoned to beg for a platoon of troops (Austrians he meant) to restore quiet in the town, which was terrified at the rumor that Italians who had broken out of prison were overrunning the neighborhood, he got the answer "yes," and what he saw arrive was a platoon of Italians. Caged in their barracks, haughty or humiliated, the Austrian officers, from the excellent colonel to the skrimshanking little subalterns, get their dinners from us and are watched over by an armed guard of ours—at their own request, for they are afraid of reprisals.

The armistice. This morning, at the station, before a small crowd of our men, an Austrian officer, a nice fellow, pantingly translated into Italian the severe terms of the treaty.

But the Vienna train let loose a crowd of people—men, women, and girls—with bags and baskets, who have come to beg bread, provisions, and garments from us.

So it is peace. *Claudite jam rivos*. That which seemed an impossible dream in the nights in the trenches has come true. Still this skin sticking to these healthy bones, after the frightful claustration and the poisonous sewer of captivity which spoiled as many good soldiers as the shells and machine-guns. And life still before me. That future which had been abolished till this moment reappears before my eyes; once more there is a broad highroad for my greedy glances, where formerly a wire fence shut in the present; once more to put out my head and look at

the possibilities of the future without fear of getting a bullet in it.

Life is coming back, with women and lying abed and plenty to eat. The even tenor that foresees no shocks. The man who carefully accumulated fat round his unwarlike belly has now become the symbol of a new day, an example by which to guide our feet and our hearts. Life, no longer eked out from day to day with only food and a dry bed as an elusive reward for hard work, but a thing of ease spent in calmly making money, a business in which that fat man has a start over the thinness of him who went through the war.

Whirling of snow in the night over the glacial steppe.

And in the feeble light of dawn the plain and the white huts lazily smoke out their boredom. (So, those mornings of last November, before settling my boots and my mud into the flea-bag, I gave a look all round to conclude my nightly vigil.)

This will be our evil heritage, or our good heritage, but irremediable: to be bound to our memories for ever, and may it not become a torture like that of a living man bound to a corpse! How is it possible that from the dreary alternation of fear and suffering and listless waiting for some end or other—peace, death, or a wound—so sweet a nostalgia should emerge, touching the heart with light fingers and leading it to ecstasies of joy?

It is possible. A tree-trunk with its white beard on the northern side, a streak of light on the level snow, a voice far off that skims over the silence of the steppe; and definite moments of the past answer to that call—names of dead soldiers, the attitude of a sentry, the hissing of the rain at dusk on the fear of being too few behind the scanty wire.

Nostalgia.

But that is all we carry with us, our little demobbed men's bundle. The others are already busily engaged in the life of every day that will also be ours—the pursuit of money, honors, and jobs. Some behave as though they too had been combatants, and usurp the purity of our title to honor and pride. Between us

and them there is a sea of dung. And you have got to cross it, you impenitent idealist, in love with the risky trade to which you were called, faithful to a dream of beauty which made you reject skrimshanking as a canker.

"Once upon a time there was a soldier who came back from the war, and he only had three-halfpence in his pocket." We have saved three-halfpence, three-halfpence of poetry, kindliness, and sacrifice, and we have got to throw them into the stinking sea, and throw ourselves in after them.

And when we are on the other side, we shall look the others in the face with burning eyes, which will never be bandaged again. They shall not take us in any more. They will speak round, rhetorical phrases at the official banquets, but we shall be there, sitting silent, at the end of the table, with our cold contempt. At the elections they will proclaim the Utopian projects of a topsy-turvy world, and instigate the facile mob-heroism of breaking idols: our expert ears will sift the pandering flow of fair words.

For there is bitterness at the bottom of our hearts, and melancholy lingers at the door of our decisions. In the night of battle, after the intoxication of the fight, in the series of parentheses of rest and duty, our life was like a discharge of rockets along the enemy's lines, an alternation of bright flashes and dark abysses, sudden visions of enormous possibilities—a road of light—thrown open to our will, brief terror of a vast power outside us which could bring every effort to nought. Gray zones in the heart, neutral zones in the action, were rare pauses, soon overcome, in that intensity of sensation. And we had neither dreams nor regrets; our whole senses were saturated with the present, whether pleasant or terrible, a definite action alone was useful and the moment alone brought decision. Immediacy, momentariness of action—oh, vanity of ideological schemes; oh, irony of illogical conclusions from wearisome premises! Success seemed possible for the most unheard-of boldness; we saw that effective-

ness could be denied to the most careful pedantries; the collapse of old hesitations, the trench-torpedo of decision which smashed up the wire of time-honored traditions and doubts. There was a law, yes, but one outside our poor powers of foresight, one that could be violated by the rashness of a gesture, to which normal common sense would not have yielded—a law of intuition, not a law of method; a despotic law that brooked no compromise.

Bureaucratic heads tried in vain to docket this impetus in prosy schedules, with little columns and statistics and remarks—it brimmed over with the vigor and illogicalness of youth, it consecrated the beauty of the unforeseen, it expressed the immediate value of the virtues of body and mind in daily experience.

And we thought that this should be the perpetual gift of our lives, intensified in rhythm, and making for a goal beyond any boundary; and we went on inventing these enormous possibilities for after the war.

It is not so. The battle over, there rushed in from every side the greedy crows, the timorous jackals, and the philosophical dung-beetles who had held aloof and said: "Enough, the parenthesis is closed; let us try to suffer the least possible damage from this war, let us resume the old regulations. A pity you spoiled so many institutions and left so many debts. Well, let's hope to put ourselves on our feet again. To live now you must do this and this—time of departure, line, station, and signals fixed all along the line." And the bellying sails of the heart collapse, all at once. We cannot say what we expected from the fine peace, but it was not this, it was not this.

It is as when one is walking over an easy crest towards a goal one's heart is set on, and suddenly there opens before one an abyss that cannot be crossed. We knew that our action alone was the arbiter and forger of events; from the vast swarm at our backs too little reached our ears, intent as we were only on the resounding of the hostile barrier at which we struck. Suddenly all collapsed. In amazement we hear the din of the new



world, now that silence has come over us and our hearts are full of unforgettable echoes.

There comes the little men whom we used to push with our elbows during a fortnight's leave, and wink at us.

"Poet, have you done playing the poet? I have a pretty girl for you, and a job. Of course, the girl is not the one who cuckolded you while you were at the war, and the job is rather a dirty one. But if you want to get on, you've got to take the dirty jobs; and if you wanted faithful love, you oughtn't to have gone away."

There comes that other, in uniform, and shakes you by the hand:

"Brother Alpino, we were brother officers, don't you remember? We really deserved this peace. Do you remember Novaledo, the Alps of Fiemme, le Melette?"

Ah, yes, it's true. He was at Novaledo only with his signature, at the Alpi di Fiemme he was with the heavy transport, and he left the Melette when the fun began. But now he is my brother officer, and, look, he has also got the blue ribbon with the silver star (You blighter, the bronze medal wasn't good enough for you.).

There comes the man who sucked from German brains the science that now gives him an academic title and the right to a higher stipend from that State which he felt no need to defend when danger was knocking at the gate—he must have been firmly anchored if not even Caporetto dug him out—and says:

"What was the good of all you did? You won the war, and bread is going up and sugar is disappearing and coal doesn't come, and we aren't going to get Dalmatia. You fool, a fat lot of good you did playing the fool up in the front line."

Alas, there comes next the man whom the October of defeat dislodged from his niche, on whom a horrible decree imposed the rank of officer against his will, and this time the right is on his side, for he can speak of Piave and the Grappa and of the push over the conquered glens. He was hunted reluctantly

into the war, and only knows its beauty and enthusiasm with the whole feeling of the country behind him, with all the lavish wealth of means and comforts given by a nation that had at last made up its mind that it wanted to win the war. All this he had, and only this. And he looks at us with contempt and pity because we have not this war in our past.

That other war we have. The war of wire that had to be torn up by hand or attacked with garden shears; the war of superior officers who told you off and of operations staged to fill a *communiqué*; the torn and hungry war of retreat to be covered or of being thrown in pell-mell because the enemy had broken through and had to be stopped at all costs; the war of unknown victories and endlessly bitter retirements; the war without turns of rest and double leave, without decorations and without propaganda. And those who returned from being prisoners were parked in a concentration camp under the guard of other soldiers.

And there comes also the gentle little friend who promised the marvelous gift so long as we were far away, and says:

"Why did you come back so late, you in the infantry? All the others have come back: the cavalry have come back, and the fortress artillery. And then, you thought about nothing but the war, and I had to think of myself. Let me introduce you to my—your successor. Of course, he isn't a warrior, but now that you have won the war—you splendid fellows!—these others also have their uses. And then, you know . . . you had better get into plain clothes too."

Shall we be downhearted, my brothers in arms, who heard all these little speeches when you came back?

Not for a moment. It is right that those who were not with us should try to belittle the war, should talk of war-psychosis, should take advantage of the rapid wearing out of the words "hero," "khaki," and "trench," and should prefer to consider the war a vast four years' lunacy from which their wisdom kept them well away.

But we who know how much they cut off their own lives

will only pity these mutilated beings, who make a noise, perhaps, only to cover their remorse, who seek each other's company and count their heads, taking courage from numbers to deprecate the stronger. Nor will we boast of our deeds, nor will we provoke them. Would you hit a blind man because he does not admire your picture?

A gulf separates us, which no communion of faith and no community of interest can fill. We know them. We know with what trembling they clung to the knees of those who could keep them out of the war, with what care they searched out any signs of illness to get medically rejected, and with what pettifogging excuses they closed their ears and consciences to the call of life that came from where danger ennobled it. They congratulate themselves on having saved their skins, and they must take it ill that we too have brought ours safely home; they think they have an advantage over us in money and health, but they do not see how far they are behind us in worth and dignity; they think they are still good citizens, and do not observe that they were nothing but deserters, deserters in cold blood, deserters who have not even the excuse of being anarchists, more deserters and more worthy of being shot—being educated men, soaked in civic tradition—than the wild mountain-dweller to whom the notions of country and duty were dim, and whom we shot that night in July because he had absented himself from the horror of a battle after he had been in it for three days, and after two years of war.

It is good for us that they were not with us. Their numbers and their mediocrity are the pedestal of our pride.

But whenever two of us meet who have trod the same road, we shall always find some corner in which to draw from our memories and a bottle of bright wine the comfort of the good old days. We shall breathe again the breath of the pine-woods and the battle; we shall call the poor forgotten dead back to feast with us. (And when those others yell out words about "great Italy," I shall see beneath their little legs, which were never sticky

with the mud up there, the huge heap of dead—the skull grinning beside the greenish corpse of a gassed man, as I saw it in the Agnelizza valley.)

As we evoke these memories, we shall forget for a little that we had to cross the sea of dung.

My Alpini have not had to cross it, since for them, after the drinking bouts of discharge in which they thought themselves immeasurably happy, the war goes on—or starts again.

Joy to be able to order liters and liters from the host, who was a sergeant-major and made him jump to it, but now it is he who has to obey the orders of the discharged man; joy not to have the retreat awaiting him, and then to walk about the village when there is so much wine even in the sky, and even the snow on the mountains has the color of *terzanello*, and the Gusella del Vescovà up there, bless it, looks like a tasting finger dipped in wine; and joy to sing the song of the heavy pack that he carries no longer and to make the archways echo with his soul-relieving monologue:

"I'm a civvy now, b—— it! Five year, I say, sleeping on straw and in muck and chats too. Blast it, five f—g years without takin' yer clothes off, and chats. . . . No more salutin' the officers if I meet 'em; they always wants to talk when they meets yer, but that there mucker can't b—— me off to prison no more, blast his b—— . . ."

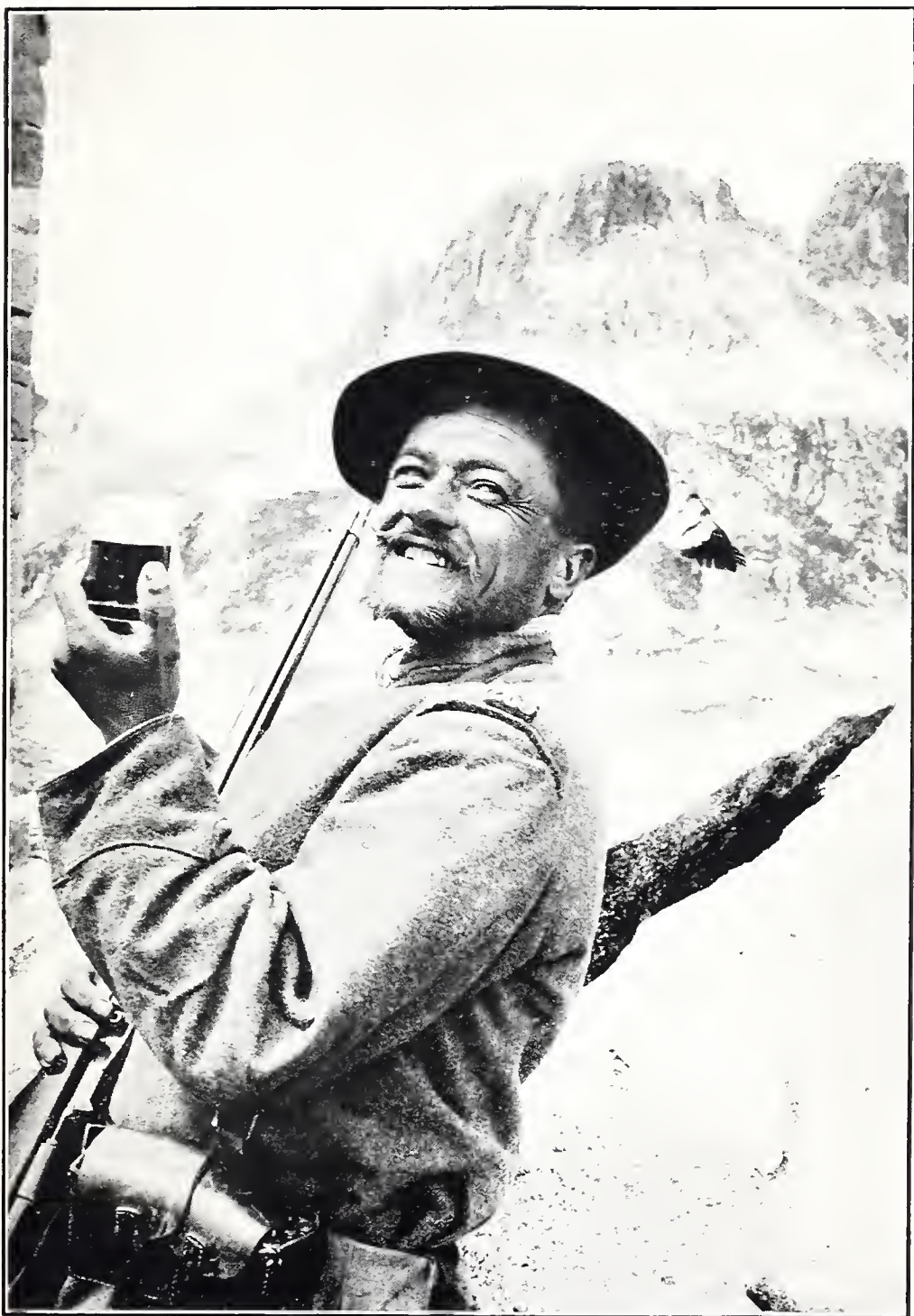
"Look, he's callin' yer."

"B—— ! Coming, sir."

"Well, Durigàn, what have you got to say to your captain now we meet?"

"Well, captain, I'm right glad to shake yer hand again. You was always so good to us, that you was . . . and the other officers, too, poor chaps, so good, that they was. You see, I've had a drop, b—— it, and my tongue gets a bit mixed like. . . . Do you remember, captain, when I got into the trench what the Boches was in, and they thought they'd cop me, those muckers—*me*, an old Alpino, small perhaps, but on old 'un, blast it . . . take off your hat to father!"





DURIGAN





On Cauriòl. "The dead are up there, under the little, rude crosses bordered with snow."

*"E tu Austria che sei il più forte  
e fatti avanti se hai del corajo . . ."*

And Durigàn roars out the song of assault at the top of his voice in honor of his captain—Durigàn, who had wanted to say a few plain words to his captain for all those five years of lice and toil, and now instead his eyes are bright and happy because the signor capitano has shaken hands with him and stands listening to him with a smile, like that Easter day on Sètòle, when there was an infernal blizzard outside, but in the hut there was cheerfulness, wine, and songs sung by him, Durigàn. He just about came up to the top of one of Bellegante's legs, and they were inseparable friends. They went together to get concertina-wire, they set out with the roll threaded on a long stick, the little man in front, the tall one behind, and as they climbed the hill they looked as if they had been made expressly for that job.

But tomorrow, Durigàn, what is there left for you to do except to go back to Switzerland? And Degàn will be off to the mines beyond the Alps to hammer a boring-bar; Da Sacco will resume the smith's tools in his little shop at Salzburg; Pellin will go to see if his Tirola had "dropped her pack" without his intervention; Mezzomo will again drive lorries over the frozen roads; Zanella will look in vain for the cottage on the Piave which war has razed, and he too will go, behind the others, to the mines or the roads beyond the Alps. Under the iron necessity of making a living, they will resume their stubborn, solitary work, up in the hostile mountains, in the treacherous mine, among unknown people. And they will go down into the shaft at night as they used to go off calmly for their turn of sentry-go; they will hew down the great trees for the fences of valley farms as they used to hew them down to make dugouts in the war. But they will be older and more tired. When it rains or when the weather changes they will feel in their still young limbs and in their scars the sharp pains of rheumatism born from the mud, snow, and muck of four years' war.

Without asking for anything. The sturdy Alpino who hurled down stones and curses on the enemy patrols from the night-bound summit, who saved the mountain and the line—and who knows how much of the war's outcome was due to his actions?—will be an unknown emigrant setting out for his rough destiny, without even having got a medal. (Naturally. The medal will have been given to the lieutenant at divisional headquarters who came up next day to see the position, and with his fine yellow leggings tempted the Cupola to drop some of its great six-inch crumps on us. But Lieutenant Moschini, who had to jump out to make the men take shelter and had his leg smashed, when he came back from hospital was moved to another battalion. Captain Busa used to say, when he was sitting among his "boys," as he called those young officers of 1898—which were all he had in the company—and imparting to them his wisdom and aphorisms: "Reconnaissance for a staff officer means coming into the trenches and getting a medal. For us it means going out of the trenches and getting told off.")

And that other man who, when made a prisoner, got free, fought with his teeth and nails, laid out one of the enemy, and brought another back with him, will carry his fierce instinct of liberty up the arduous mountain-peak, to follow with rope and ice-ax the fragile thread of the crest, dragging behind him the Englishman who pays him for it.

They will pass away—miners, shepherds, carters, and woodmen. They will sign no memorials, they will come to no polling-booths, they will wangle no job out of the State stew-pot. We shall never find them again unless we go to look for them on the mountains or beyond the frontiers. But they will be the men who, the day the mine collapses, will go with their usual cool courage under danger to look for the bodies of their comrades; who will go out in the storm to look for the lost; who will be naked at the bottom of a tunnel, or pinched with cold in the wintry wood, or banished to roll down rocks on a bare mountain-top, or panting as they hammer on their boring-

bars to open a road across the hills, or laboring as lumbermen<sup>1</sup> or plodding behind the tree-trunks on the wagons: and the day the King sends to say that they have got to come back and fall in and march in column of fours, they will stick the hat and feather on their head with some harmless oath and will not ask to skrimshank. At the most they will ask to be made mule-drivers.

*Ed il Re ci manda a dire  
che si trova sui confini,  
e ha bisogno di noi alpini  
per potersi avvanzar.*

(And the King he sends to tell us  
That he can't get on no more,  
And he needs us Alpine fellows  
To go forward as before.)

<sup>1</sup> Lit. "Laboring at the *cìdolo*." The *cìdolo* is a barrage across the Piave near Perarolo which holds up the logs floated down the river.

## NOTE

SOME readers, when they have reached the end of their task, may ask themselves curiously where many of those men have ended whom I have named in these chronicles, and for whom I have perhaps been able to reveal some of that affection that I keep for them after so long a period of time and silence. And I am the first to regret that I have lost the names and the traces of so many brave lads.

I see some of them again from time to time. Tòrmena Camillo is among the most faithful; he sends me all the photographs of his family festivals, and often invites me to go and spend a few days with him and the other survivors of the Val Cismon battalion at Valdobbiadene ("We'll drink for three days when you pay us a visit"). I found Barro at Belluno, and he insisted on being my runner again for a whole day, taking charge of my camera and my overcoat, as he did so many years ago at Castelgomberto when he carried my bag and dispatch-case; and Zilio collects for me here and there about the valleys of Feltre testimonies of regard on the part of the veterans and faithfully sends them on to me.

But most of them are dead, naturally: like De Fanti, after having had the matchless prize of escaping from prison; like Colognese, promoted sergeant, decorated several times, and killed at Tomàtico in defense of his Montebelluna. Beside him fell Manoni, a youthful captain of fifteen days' seniority, repulsing the fifth and sixth Austrian counter-attack as he shouted: "B—— it, I'll stop them coming up, the b—s," and a bullet in the forehead laid him out; and Borla too fell in this classic way, with a bullet in his forehead; and Rech died at the cross of Tomàtico, his chest torn to bits by a bomb—all of them in a day



of sacrifice and honor for my old Val Cismon battalion. Pisoni, Borella, and Somaggio were wounded, and Somaggio's wound was so nasty that the doctor gave him up for lost, and, as he was frantic to have a glass of cognac, the doctor said to the stretcher-bearers: "Oh, well, give him one, for it's the last drink he'll get, poor chap"; but he got well instead, and went back to his home fat and well looking. Pisoni is a colonel, and commands the 9th Alpini, and I can't tell you how it makes one laugh to hear that "the old 'un's commanding the 9th."<sup>1</sup> Barèl, the man who stole the priest's hat, was killed at Col San Giovanni, riddled by a hand-grenade; Major Bosio, Sergeant Conz, and Lieutenant Zucchi died of civilian diseases, but caught in the war; pray God that old Romanin won't die, who got ill escaping from prison through the night and the snows of the Alps. Mangili is a civilian, with one arm short. Simonetti and Pontin rest for ever at the foot of the Grappa; Garbarino was killed at Fontanasecca, Calmi and Feruglio on the Grappa, and they got the gold medal (the untidy Feruglio, who wouldn't wear the ribbon of the bronze medal!). And Pianezze was killed somewhere else, after getting the silver medal and beginning to go up in rank. Loàt fell at Ortigara, but Zanella, his faithful friend, got off with a wound, a second one, and he had the good luck to get another medal and to come home safely; and now he writes to me from France that "a little Alpino, called Geronimo," has been born to him.

And do you know who got home with a whole skin and is doing very well? Fàoro, the smuggler. He writes to me that, although the frontier has gone farther away, he does not despair, "and I'm very glad to get news again of my old commander.—Your old soldier, Fàoro Daniele da Lamon, smuggler."

P. M.

<sup>1</sup> "El vecio comanda il nono." There is a pun here on "nono" (ninth) and "nonno" (grandfather).



## AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE FOURTH ITALIAN EDITION

### TO THE READER

IN the tenth year of the peace, here, gentle reader, is the fourth edition of my war-diary.

I was the first to be surprised at this unaccustomed good fortune which befell a war-book, a book belonging to the most humble, the most deprecated, and most unpopular kind of literature: for I well know with what boredom, what resigned tolerance, and what presumption critics, men of letters, publishers, Utopists, and civilians, in these last ten years have turned up their noses at books of this kind, mumbling stale commonplaces about bellicose literature and the delusions of ex-soldiers, or else quoting the Bible—those of them who had any reading—and saying that to recall the war now that, God willing, we are at peace, is like the dog that returns to his vomit.

So it is a great surprise that this little book should have found favor even outside the narrow circle of real ex-combatants, who are so few in number even though their associations are so plethoric. And when the surprise gives way to sober reasoning, I can find no other explanation of the book's success but the bare sincerity of its words and its episodes. There is too much swearing, people tell me. There are too many dark-eyed Maries and fair-haired Josephines. There is too much ragging of superior officers; too much side and unjust criticism. I know it, but I cannot help it. That is how we talked: we were made like that. Badly made? Perhaps; but we were made good enough to be called up, and, even as we were, we served to finish the war victoriously.

But this little book, accused of defeatism by some heroes of the back of the front, and of cynically exalting war by some Utopian adherents of perpetual peace, is neither a hymn nor a blaspheming,

neither a celebration nor a deprecation. It could not be so, for the hymn and the imprecation are always hyperbolic, born of posterior states of mind, and therefore insincere. That is why I maintain that no more war-books can be written till a new war comes. The man who undertook today, in good faith, to narrate his memories as a fighting man would write a false book. Not by his own fault, but because of the qualities of human nature. The most faithful and humble memory distorts long-past events. The shells fall closer, the actions are enormously exaggerated, the periods of waiting lose their length, the intermediate moments disappear: the falsehoods and the rhetoric of others act unconsciously upon us. With what that should neither be conventional nor hypothetical could I now fill in the frightful silence that, in my memories, enwraps the battle of December 4th, 1917, on the saddle between Mount Tondarecar and Castलगomberto? Certainly that afternoon of fighting at close quarters, that struggle at a few dozen meters' distance, that wearisome disengaging from enemy encirclement, and those *mêlées* round the machine-guns, must have been enveloped in a tremendous din; but, while I have still very clear recollections of the lie of the ground, the rocks, the mountain pines, the men, the wounded, the dead, the advancing German masses, the blood flowing from the forehead of Corporal-major De Boni, and the wide, staring eyes of Altin, nothing remains to me of the voices, the shouts, the noises, or the explosions, as though I had lived through that scene—a vain image among other vain images—on the screen of a cinema.

Those critics were wrong who, rather disdaining these humble jottings of mine published immediately after the great tempest, said: "Only the years to come will give us the books that really describe the war." Completely wrong. The books that really describe war are those written shortly after the fight, immediately outside it. Even among these there are false ones, mark you, at least for us ex-soldiers, if our judgment—and some people doubt it—is to be of any value; false, because written by men in the back areas, or by boasters whom no war ever cured, or by people who took into the front line too many literary or humanitarian preconceptions. And strike out of the list all the novels which have the war as a background, because the war is too serious a thing to posture round with sentimental fables. There remains a scanty little heap of books, ten or twelve at most, in our tongue.

Few? I know. Badly written? A pity. Could they be improved or lengthened? Never, for the reasons I have given above. Amen: we will do better in the next war. Nor need the clever reader think to catch me out by asking me whether the episodes inserted in this reprint are not also late recollections distorted by distance. No. The new episodes belong to that time; they were written at that time, exactly as I found them among my papers: and they were not put into the first edition for reasons of equilibrium or through circumstances which even I should now find it hard to explain.

But, even with the additions, my book has remained what it was at first, a book as distant and strange to my spirit of today as the chronicles of a remote childhood, as distant and fabulous as my present memory of the days of waiting under arms, on the far side of an abyss which it seems impossible that I could have corporeally crossed.

I was a boy then, perhaps young for my age, with a smug little pack of pedantries from school and university, with confused political ideas oscillating between a mild Socialism, a generic internationalism, and an obscure and troubled love of my country; with no knowledge of men and women; rather sickly from studious vigils, commonplace adventures, and conceited sluggishness; only hardened for mountain warfare by six or seven winters of Alpine sports and six or seven summers of climbing in the Alps and life on the sea. When I went for a soldier, I was uncertain of my capacities except when holding ice-ax or sheet, or when annotating some volume of history or commentary. And I was dolefully preparing to be a lawyer in a dreary law-office in my Bologna. I well know that sometimes, when, on a walk with a friend as depressed as myself, some Sunday stolen from the gay chase after saucy lasses (*"licet enim sine luxuria agere festum diem,"* as we read in the moralist Seneca), we visited the tomb of Francesco de' Canetoli, man of arms and jurist, in the red Piazza di San Francesco, I was pleased by this contrast, and took an omen from it, wishing myself also, now in a fair way to become a jurist, the lot also of being a man of arms. But ask yourself, reader, if there could have been a more rhetorical and pedantic aspiration. Only, on an evening of winter storm on the mountains, on the borders of Italy, as I looked at the tempest steaming up from the valleys beyond the frontier and shot down with my head low, curved over my skis,



towards those lands that were not ours, I would imagine I was reaching them thus as a soldier, in an adventure of war, and my heart swelled at the thought. But I came back from that brief trepidation as from a drinking-bout, humiliated, depressed, and resigned to a daily life without surprises.

But the war came truly; and I went for a soldier. From my earliest years at the university I had had the habit of noting down in pocket note-books, almost always epigrammatically, by means of quotations, abbreviations, allusions, or rough, clumsy verses, the rare events, the frequent day-dreams, the disappointments and the mortifications of my empty days; and this habit I kept up as a soldier. And, as in peace, so in war, I was faithful to the style of those jottings, without order and, above all, without measure, giving many words to futile events and recording days of intensity with a single date or a single word. Thus the combat of November 15th, 1917, is only recorded in my diary with three words "*Non è passato*" (the enemy, it is understood); while over the color of some girl's eyes whom I had wooed during a short leave (without success: "a fortnight's no good to me," the honest ladies of Bologna were then wont to say), or over a mountain view, I often spread myself romantically in many lines.

I preserved this want of balance in my book when, the war being scarcely over and I being nauseated by the rhetoric which was already beginning to be trumpeted around, I bent to the task of copying and filling out my notes. And that is why it is so uneven in tone and proportions, and so little sanguinary, in comparison with the books of those who were stretcher-bearers or territorials<sup>1</sup> in the war: that is why it smells so little of corpses and feet. It would have been easy for me in 1919, with my memories still fresh, when still immune from that contagion of home which irremediably spoiled the sanctity of our memories for every one of us—it would have been easy for me to write a fine piece, for instance, on that day of November 15th so laconically recorded—of the Austrians who came to the assault in close order, of the dead on the wire, of the shouts, the bullets, the calm faces of De Fanti, Romanin, Trombini, and De Riva, all those ragged old bearded ruffians who belonged to me for

<sup>1</sup> The Italian territorials were men aged from thirty-three to forty-two who, in the ordinary course, did not go to the front line. The Alpini territorials alone went to the front as a matter of course (Translator).

life and death, and of that Neapolitan major of artillery who had the bad luck to be left in the middle of us in his hut, without guns or telephone, and who came on all fours up over the back of the trench to see how things were going on, cautiously, almost surprised that we were resisting, and said: "Well, it's the first time I've seen these Alpini, and they look to me jolly fine fellows!"

Of course. But in my diary I only found those three words. The evening I wrote them that was our only thought: that these Germans were soldiers like the rest, even if they had broken in and attacked us on the east; that they had come on only because we had retired without fighting, and that where we had stopped we had also stopped them. And we thought less, that evening, of our rotten trade, our hard bread, our scanty rations, and the letters that didn't come. The day after, yes, all those sad things must have reappeared in our thoughts; and the following days you can see clearly that the diary minutely records our fear of being left there, our envy for the wounded going back to Italy, our rancor at not being relieved, and the finicking silliness of a certain high command who one fine day changed round all the troops in the line so as to reproduce—this was one of the many reasons they adduced—the national colors to frighten the enemy: all the Bersaglieri, red, on this side; in the middle all the Alpini, green; and on the left all the Queen's infantry, white.

But on the days of battle, who of us stopped to sniff the odors of the dead, to investigate the charnel-house, or to compassionate the mutilated bodies? Be mistrustful, gentlemen, if a war-book has too many of these ingredients. The dead stank; who denies it? But our habituation to that reek was such that the sensation, more often than not, did not translate itself into perception, did not touch the bottom of a mind preoccupied with so many other humbler things. I should be sorry for the man who had always lived, in battle and in the front line, in the trenches and at rest, with the hallucinated clearness of impressions which you find, for example, in a too-celebrated picture of the German, Otto Dix, "*Der Krieg*"; quarters of human flesh as in a butcher's shop, skulls eaten away by shells and gas, and above the burgeoning of putrescence a stiffened corpse hoisted up on the prongs of two bayonets. He would have gone mad in a little while, and they would have sent him to be comfortable in some hospital villa by the sea or in the hills: but it would have been good-by to honest chronicles.

Therefore, have patience if in this diary there are drinkings, mules, oaths, tales of the L. of C. and rest areas, so much cleanly longing for home, such a smell of earth and of the woods. We thought of nothing else. The postcards we sent home were, more often than not, reduced to a "N.N.," more laconic than those of G.H.Q. I don't say that sometimes we, too, did not have our philosophical colloquies with eternity, that sometimes a clear, pitiless revelation of the horror of our life did not flash upon us: they were shudders which froze us unexpectedly in the uniform torpor which made us always ready for action. Then, the man who had paper and pencil to hand, and the will and capacity to express himself, wrote notes sufficient to let the uninitiated measure the profundity of the tragedy. But these lucid moments were anything but frequent in healthy men, in the fit for service, in the die-hards, in those men who, unless they got their packet, could not be induced to take the road to the rear: and, luckily for us, they were overcome and consoled by periods of thoughtless gayety, of resigned apathy, of humble kindliness.

Dear reader, I should not speak like this of the things we guard most jealously, or of my little book, did not I myself, at a distance of ten years, find myself looking at these printed pages like a stranger. Ten years, ten lusters, a whole epoch, have gone by since then. I read myself again with the lucidity of another; I observe the incongruities, the want of proportion, the unhealthy indulgence in certain literary *motifs* from which the war did not succeed in freeing me, and the weakness of the words which were meant to seize superhuman exaltations. But I do not repent; I do not correct; I should have to write it all again, to spoil it all; I should be doing just as absurdly as those who are erecting pompous funerary monuments while destroying the rough cemeteries at the feet of the crags. And, once more, I am excluding pages of intimate life which interest nobody but myself. And so I again send out into the world, to find the people of my faith and my longings, this pair of shoes re-soled, re-nailed, and well greased, yet still the same, fitting the feet of all the old soldiers who have come back, and still good to resume their well-known wanderings among the pines and the boulders.

P. M.

MILAN,  
*April* 1928.











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